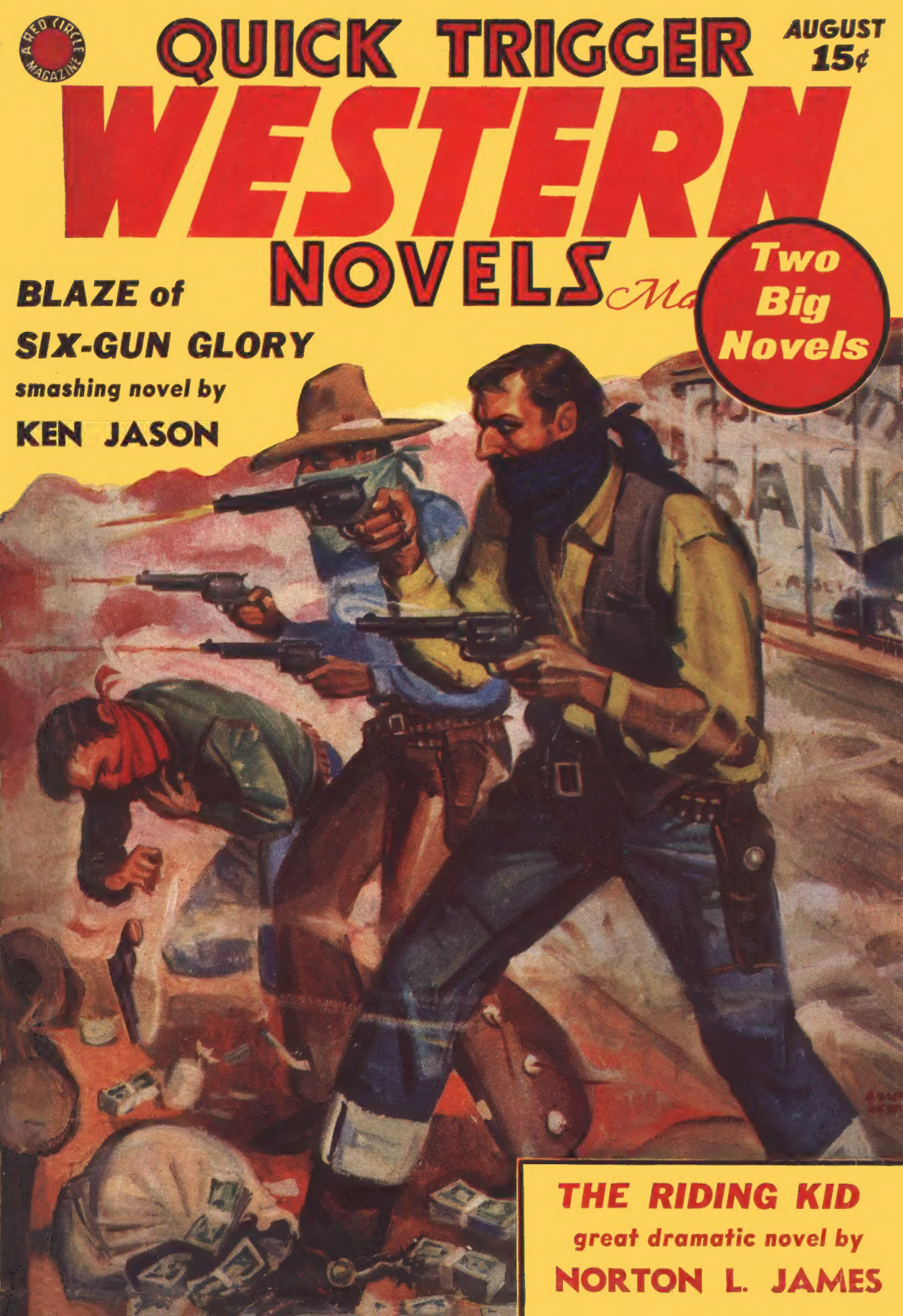
A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE

QUICK TRIGGER WESTERN NOVELS

AUGUST
15¢

Two Big Novels

BLAZE of SIX-GUN GLORY
smashing novel by
KEN JASON



THE RIDING KID
great dramatic novel by
NORTON L. JAMES

BROADCAST *thru your radio* TALK - SING - PLAY

BROADCAST your voice on programs coming through your own radio set—make announcements from any part of the house—inject wise cracks, Josh and mystify friends. Imitate radio stars, practice crooning, singing, radio acting, etc. Do a "Ben Bernie" or a "Rudy Valee."

World Mike

Made especially for home use, attached in a jiffy without tools. **Not a toy.** Put on your own programs at home, parties, club affairs, etc. Barrels of fun! Easy to operate.

Price Only 25c

DELUXE MIKE

Large, substantial, all-metal mike. Practise radio announcing, broadcasting, programs, etc., thru your own radios. Reproduces voice in loud, clear tone without distortion. Regular table model—can be held in hand. Guaranteed.

Price Postpaid **$1.00**

CHAMELEON 25c

A LIVE PET

WATCH IT CHANGE COLOR!

Get one of these most wonderful of all creatures. Watch it change color. Study its habits. Wear one on the lapel of your coat—it's handy for food. No trouble to keep. Can go for months without food. About 4 in. long. Shipped to any address in the U.S.A. by mail. Live delivery guaranteed.

Free Chameleon. Price Postpaid.

5 Master Keys

Did you ever lose or forget your key? Probably on times. Don't worry any more about lost keys . . . for any keys, for that matter, as these master keys will open most ordinary door locks. Five different keys for various types of locks. Will save their cost if you only use them once, but you'll probably find them so handy that you'll always carry them. Price **25c**

MIDGET POCKET RADIO $1.00

Listen to Music and Sports Everywhere You Go

This amazing midget pocket radio brings in programs within 25 miles of broadcasting station —even more under favorable conditions—in the country, in bed, at camp, office, car, etc. **ANYWHERE** and **EVERYWHERE**. Merely connect an aerial and ground wire, attach single or double head phone and tune in. No expense to operate. No batteries. No static or noise. No tubes, no crystal to adjust. Just one moving dial locates stations.

MIDGET POCKET RADIO. Price **$1.00**

DeLUXE MODEL PRICE $1.95
Built in Phone, 2 unit. Operates like Midget Model **$1.95**

YACHT CAPS 25c

Smart, snappy. Just what every real boy is wearing. Cool and comfortable. **White Twill Yacht Cap**, with black oilcloth peak, sweat band, gold braid and brass buttons with anchor. Price **25c**

White Duck Yacht Cap, superior quality duck, white celluloid visor, gold cord, brass buttons and anchor.

State size.

Price Postpaid **35c**

Marriage License 10c

& Fun Licenses

Printed with seal suitable for framing. Hand one of these to a friend. Your choice:

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Doctor's Certificate
Liar's License
Death Certificate
Birth Certificate
Arrest Warrant
College Diploma
Dog License
Divorce Certificate
One Arm Driver's Cer.
Kibitzer's Certificate
Gold Mine Stock Cer.
Air Pilot's License
Bootlegger's License

Liar & Grafter Cer.
High School Diploma
Beauty Queen Judge
Gossipers Certificate
Gold Digger's

Price 10c Each License. Any 3 for 25c.

Radio & Television Book

How to build inexpensive crystal sets, electric radio, short wave radio, hints on building television set. With a television set you can SEE and HEAR events. Price **10c**

Hi-Powered Air Pistols

HITS HARD
A powerful, high grade Air Pistol shaped like an automatic, pocket size. Fires BB shot obtainable anywhere. Very powerful yet perfectly safe for home use. Two styles. Single shot Pistol or Repeater fires 100 shots in one loading. The single shot shoots air rifle darts and BB shot. Well made and durable; all metal, nickel plated, natural grain wood stocks. Front and rear sights. Better than an air rifle. Shoots expense collect.

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328 page, vest pocket edition. Complete examinations, answers, applications, requirements. Covers Railway Mail Service, Post Office Jobs, Engineering Dept., Secret Service, Custom Service, etc. Price **50c**

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Tells how to make batteries, dynamos, motors, telegraph apparatus, telephones, lights, electric bells, alarms, coils, electric engines, etc. 64 pages, 100 illustrations. Price Postpaid **10c**

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1-Tube Pocket Radio with built-in phone. **MUSIC FROM RADIO.** Beautiful Cathedral tone. Complete in one unit with batteries, tube, switch. Fits in pocket. Listen anywhere with good results. Ideal and ground. Uses ordinary flashlight cells. Lasts for months. **$3.49**

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Beautiful midget mantel crystal radio. **No batteries, no tubes, no expense.** Receives stations within 25 miles. Radio complete with phone, wire for ground and aerial. Ready to use. Swell for desk, bedside, etc. Loud clear tone. Easy to hook up. Lasts a lifetime. **$1.99**

Price Postpaid . . . . . .

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Complete Radio. 25c! Get reception within 25 miles of station. All you need is aerial & phone. Completely assembled & wired. Sensitive crystal. **Reception guaranteed. No tubes, no batteries, no expense. Make 2 connections and it's ready.** 25c

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Single Earphone 89c

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Covers broadcast band only. 350 mile Reception. Bristol board cabinet, tuning dial, clips, condensers, resistor, hook-up wire, wiring diagrams. RCA tube, etc. Complete kit with tube. Fun and educational to build. Loud earphone volume. **$1.10**

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Single Earphone 89c

All Wave World Wide Radios

Remarkable results—simple operation. **Covers 15-600 meters, police, amateur, broadcast, code, short wave, foreign, etc.** Kit with 1 coil. Tube, phones not included **$2.49**

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Electric (AC-DC current. No batteries) Price **$2.99**

Either set wired. 75c extra.

HOW TO LOVE 10c

Every normal being is susceptible to love and tender passion. When love comes the lovers realize how inadequate is the language at their command to tell the depths of the consuming passion that is growing in their hearts. It is to soothe the soul of the lover, in that this work has been compiled. All about LOVE!

PRICE 10c POSTPAID.

FRENCH PHOTO RING

A handsome ring, finished in imitation of platinum & set with a large imitation diamond. In the shank of the ring is a small mysterious picture almost invisible to the naked eye, yet magnified to an almost incredible degree. Pictures of bathing girl beauties, French actresses, views of France, Panama Canal, Lord's Prayer (every word legible). Price Postpaid **25c**

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Imitation diamond ring. Jumbo size. Extremely attractive looking. Very popular. Worn by businessmen. **$1.25**

Price **49c**

BAROMETER RING

Accurate weather forecast almost as your fingertips. Tells if it will rain, snow, be cold or fair, etc. Lasts a long time.

Price **49c**

SKULL & CROSSBONE

Oxidized metal finish. Said to bring good luck. Brilliant imitation stone. Looks like solid silver.

Ring only **$1**

OLD MADGE'S DREAM BOOK

Dreams, lucky numbers, oracles, fortune telling tables, astrology, marriage, divorce & births.

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By game's finest hurler. Curves, Knuckles, drops, fast ones, etc. Full course.

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Aviation Army Navy Rings

Handsomely embossed emblem rings made to resemble rings worn by men in U.S. Government Service. Jumbo size, accurate detail, with American Eagle, State blind and size.

SILVER APPEARANCE. Each Sterling Silver $1.00; Gold Filled $1.75

Roman

Jumbo oversize ring in two colors with imitation cameo. Extremely smart, very popular. Style

Price **25c**

2-Initial

Impressive. Your seven initials right on the ring. Be sure to specify whether you want Print, State or Price **35c**

STUD

Imitation diamond Pin. Be stone protects you when you hit something. Useful, Does double duty. Price **35c**

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Extra Rolls 16½c

An automatic harmonica that plays a music roll just like a player piano. A wholly brass band all in one—but without sense. Nothing could be simpler. While you blow. Nothing could be simpler. Hundreds of Rolls. **My Blue Heaven. Sidewalks of New York. Yes Sir, That's My Baby. Rose Marie. Merry Widow Waltz. Rose Marie. Old Black Joe. Turkey in the Straw. Alexander's Ragtime Band. Humoresque. Dinky Purley Vou. Make Believe. Over the Waves. Home Sweet Home. Auld Lang Syne. The Old Town Tonight. Wabash Moon. Waltz You Saved for Me. Lazy. Bones. Vieni Vieni. Home on the Range, etc. Extra rolls, 16½c. ROLMONICA and 3 roll $1.50**

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Size of a postage stamp. Contains the Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer, Twenty-third Psalm, etc. Price Postpaid **15c**

Leatherette cover, gold edges 50c

YOUR CHOICE 59c

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Men's photo ring. With hand colored portrait of sweetheart, etc. Nickel plated. State size. Price **59c**

Photo Lighter

Lighter with picture in full colors in cap. Send picture and state size for selection. Very Attractive. Price **59c**

Photo Tie Holder

Tie clasp with hand colored photo in full colors. Send photo and state size for combination design. Price **59c**

Photo Pen & Pencil

Pen and pencil with colored photo in cap. 4½" long. Send Picture and State Sex. Price **59c**

Lives of Hotcha Chorus Girls

Reveals all the intimate secrets and fascinating pastimes in the lives of famous Broadway hotcha girls. Tells in vivid detail every move they make from the time they get up until the time they go to bed. **Nothing is omitted.** For the first time a famous author takes you behind the scenes and gives you intimate glimpses into their secrets. Conceals nothing—the truth and only the truth. Everybody should know what is going on. Price 10c.

Life, Loves, Secrets, Diary, 10c. Confessions of a Minister's Daughter, 10c. Post Books for 25c Postpaid

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Electric Projector. Bright clear pictures 14x18" or full size. Insert film, turn crank and watch pictures. Uses flashlight cells. 2x2x6". Price Postpaid **35c**

FILMS. 15c each. Western, Cartoon, etc. Price Postpaid **25c**

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A BIG BARGAIN! Big 2 draw, powerful telescope. Swell for outdoors, nature and sports. Looking at moon, etc. Converts into Solar Telescope by using smoke darks.

Price Postpaid **25c**

Field Glass

This genuine, classy Field Glass for only a few cents. Compact size, one finger focussing, unhampered 2 eyed vision. Remarkable clarity. Swell for sports, nature study, etc.

Price Postpaid **25c**

CAMERA OUTFIT 45c

Develop & print your own pictures. Nothing else needed. Camera takes sharp, clear pictures. Films, printing paper, developing chemicals. With full instructions.

Price Postpaid **45c**

JOY BUZZER 28c

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WHOOPEE CUSHION 25c

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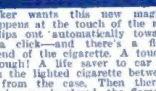

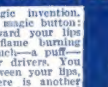

426 Jokes & Riddles. 25 Tricks. 10 Parlor Games. 25 Toasts. 25 Stories. 105 Money making Secrets. 22 Monologues. 21 Puzzles. 13 Problems. Comic recitations. Funny Readings. 10 Parlor Pastimes. 13 Flirtations. 1000 Names & their Meanings. 10 Picture Puzzles. 32 Easy Experiments. Dear and Dumb Alphabet. Shadowgraphy. Fortune Telling by Fortune with Dominoes, Cards, Tea Cup, etc. Hypnotism. Ventriloquism. Cut-outs for Checkers, Chess, Backgammon and Geese. 9 Men Morris. Anagrams. 25 Card Tricks. Crystal Gazing, etc. Now published in one big volume. Price Postpaid **15c**

Bull Dog Fish Hooks

HOOK ALL THE BIG ONES!

NEVER LETS GO! **15c**

Won't Let Go Catch fish every time. A trifle shoots them off. Reel hooks the fish. When the fish bites, the second hook strikes the fish outside the head. The harder the fish struggles, the tighter the hook holds. Simple, strong and durable. Use these hooks and **NEVER LOSE A FISH.** Price Each . . . **15c**

JU-JITSU DON'T BE BULLIED

30c

The Japanese art of self-defense. New methods of attack and defense are given, illustrated so that anyone can fully understand them. Deals fully with grips, throws, holds, locks, body holds, defense against revolver, strangling, armlocks, scissors, nelson, headlock, holding a man down, double knee throw, stick attack, defense against knife attack, defense against two assailants, Stomach throw, neck throw, thumb knockout, nerve pinches, and numerous others. Learn to protect yourself under all circumstances with nature's weapons. Fear no man, guns or knives! "Science of Ju Jitsu" Only 30c.

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Into a trunk, under the bed or anywhere. Lots of fun fooling teacher, policeman or friends.

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$1.35

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Climbing Monkey Dummy Fits like a glove. **Movable hands and head.** Will climb any where. Amusing, entertain everyone. Price Only **15c**

Dummy Dan sits on your knee. Operate his mouth and head, moving his head and mouth. After you learn to throw your voice, make him talk just like famous ventriloquists on radio and stage. Has attractive tailored suit. 10 in. tall. Looks life-like. Price **$1.35**

The MAGIC CIGARETTE CASE HANDS YOU A LIGHTED CIGARETTE

Every smoker wants this new magic invention. Look what happens at the touch of the magic button: A cigarette slips out automatically toward your lips —you hear a click—and there's a flame burning right at the end of the cigarette. Just puff and that's enough! A life saver to car drivers. You puff, and with the lighted cigarette between your lips, you draw it from the case, and the case is another. There is another flame and presto! the next cigarette automatically jumps into position. Amazingly easy to use. Reliable, safe dependable. Price Postpaid **$2.65**

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What will it bring for you? What will happen? Let Madame Normand's Fortune Telling Cards predict the future! Just get a deck and friends for miles around want to get in on the fun. At parties, gatherings, evenings, everybody will want to tell their fortunes. It fascinates them. Yet there is nothing difficult to telling fortunes—every card is plainly marked with its meaning and how interpreted. Each card becomes at once apparent. Complete directions with every deck. Price 35c per deck. Deluxe deck with 53 ivory finished cards. 75c.

Learn to DANCE

OVER 100 ILLUSTRATIONS

25c

LATEST STEPS. Be popular. Good dancers are always welcome—in demand at social gatherings. Partners welcome when dancing. The latest, smartest steps without a teacher. Don't miss out when the music starts. Get lots of fun from parties or dances.

If you want to become a perfect dancer, learn to dance from this new easy way. **BOOK TELLS** How to develop ease & control, improve your dance steps, art of holding, how to walk to music, how to lead, latest fox-trot steps, Natural and Reverse Turns, the Reverse Wave, The Quickstep, swaying to music, Waltz, Backward changes, the Continental, The famous Six-time Waltz, the Manhattan, the College Rhumba, The Carlo, Charleston, etc.

Price Postpaid **25c**

HOW TO TAP DANCE

PRICE 25c

Why envy the easy rhythm and fascinating grace of Step 'n Fetchit, Fred Astaire etc. Tap dance like a STAR, 6 HOURS is a new simplified course by Prof. Wilson. No special ability needed. Be smart. Everybody's tapping. The whole town is tapping. Get out & tap in time with your feet.

310 Illustrations

Hostesses love it. Friends adore it. Besides, tap dancing is not only invigorating and entertaining but is also a healthful exercise for making the limbs supple and giving a "springy" feeling of fitness to the whole body. Promotes slimness nature's way—no pills, drugs or dieting. Readers say: "...wonderful benefit. Thank you for adding tap dancing to my accomplishments." Price 25c postpaid.

Fits In Watch Pocket

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World's Smallest CANDID CAMERA

Although in size this camera can fit into your watch pocket, vest pocket or palm of hand, it will take some of the finest pictures you have ever seen. **Accurately ground lens, reflection bulls eye and direct vision view finder** insure you of good shots with little difficulty. Takes 8 pictures, size ⅝x⅝ in. upon each roll. Can be set for time and instantaneous snapshots, and locked so that no pictures can be taken. Pictures may be enlarged up to 8x10" still retaining a amazing amount of detail. Uses fine grain film that insures good snapshots even under adverse weather conditions.

Film easily removed and inserted. Price $1.25

Film for above camera. 8 Exposures. Price 10c

Complete Outfit consisting of Camera, 2 Films and Leather Case. Price Postpaid $1.90

45c Candid Camera

Precision optical instrument in which instrument and mass production have been combined to produce high quality photographic results. Fixed focus, 1-25 speed shutter and wide latitude, fast lens eliminates exposure problems. Roll takes 8 pictures. Buret case. Lens ¼x¼ inch.

Only Camera that Carries Spare Film within itself! Extra Camera, 45c Films per roll . 25c

JAPANESE ROSE BUSHES

Japanese Rose Bush seeds produce one of the most amazing varieties of the rose ever developed. May be sown indoors or outdoors and blooms the first year it is planted, and when two years old, the bush is a mass of roses. Three shades—white, pink and crimson. Blooms regularly. **10c**

Price of Seeds **15c**

3 Packets 25c, 12 Packets 95c

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CHASES FLIES AWAY. Protects you from the annoyance and pain of flies will not stay in a room where it is grown. Plant and blossoms in homes have no odor. Flowers are large, cup shaped, white and delightful. Shoo-Fly Seeds. Per Pkt. **15c**

Cactus Seeds. Pkt. . . . **10c**

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PERFUME PLANT

Blooms only at night, giving forth most delightful scented fragrance for quite a distance. Causes much comment. For house or garden. Perfume can be made from flowers. Price Seeds Per Packet **15c**

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Cactus Seeds. Pkt. . . . **10c**

3 for 25c. 25c per dozen

Sex Indicator Fascinating discovery that is used by some to tell the sex of eggs, handwriting, etc. Is fun for many years. Price Postpaid **10c**

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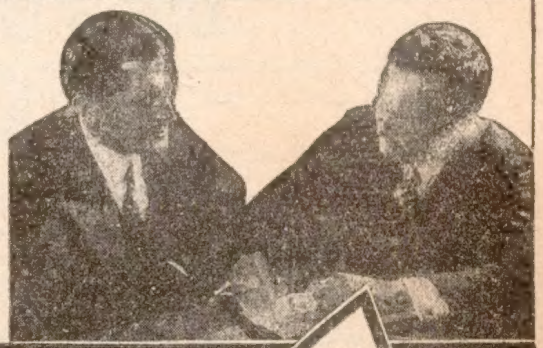
A NEW INDUSTRY

OPENING UNLIMITED NEW OPPORTUNITIES

for "FIRST-IN-FIELD" PROFITS...NO HOUSE-TO-HOUSE CANVASSING

Out of obscurity to national prominence—the history of this new business invention. In business offices throughout the U. S. this invention is opening up a new, rich source of cash income and cutting operating costs to the extent of countless thousands of dollars. Today—now, as you read this, business firms—large and small—schools, newspapers, hospitals, manufacturers, etc.—are making substantial installations, after testing small trial units. Representatives are making profits far beyond average. For example, L. F. Strong, Kansas, turns in $163.38 profit in two days. S. Clair, New York, $70 in a single day. It isn't all a matter of selling the customer only ONE time, either. H. Cooley, Oklahoma, writes: "My ELEVENTH repeat order. From all indications, I will be able to double my output the next few weeks. Money-making possibilities are unlimited." J. Olinger, Iowa: "The very first day, I netted $25.00 clear profit. This proposition is a good clean business profession." C. W. Ferrell, passes 1,000 sale mark, each paying from $5 to $60 net profit per sale. E. T. Wilson, Georgia, $46.70 one day's profit, three hours work, $58.00 another day, five calls. I. J. Keuper, Delaware, over $1,000 clear his first month. And so forth, more than we can mention here.

These men are beginners. How could they enter a field totally new to them and earn such remarkable sums in these desperate times? Read about a new business that does away with the need for high pressure selling. A rich field that is creating new money-making frontiers for wide awake men. Those who enter now will pioneer — to them will go the choicest opportunities.



Four $15 Sales Daily— PAY $280 WEEKLY

INSTALLING NEW BUSINESS SPECIALTY ON FREE TRIAL MAKING ENORMOUS CASH SAVINGS IN OPERATING COSTS for THOUSANDS OF FIRMS THROUGHOUT THE U.S. & CANADA

$4,707 SAVINGS FOR ONE KANSAS STORE IN 2 MONTHS

Sanders Ridgway of Kansas turns $88.60 investment into $4,707.00 cash! Pollom & Son, Indiana, in 45 days turn $15.00 investment into $2,250 cash. F. H. Pfeiffer Co., Illinois, investment $45.00; turned into $2,601.14 cash. Thames Lumber Co., Conn., got $1,026.84 out of $15 investment!

With these and scores of similar results to display, our representatives interest every business man, from the very smallest to the very largest. No one can dispute the proof in the photo—copies of actual letters which our men show.

NO HIGH PRESSURE—SIMPLY INSTALL—SELLS ITSELF

Here is a business offering an invention so successful that we make it sell itself. Our representatives are now instructed not to attempt any selling whatsoever! They simply tell what they offer, show proof of success in every line of business and every section of the country. Then install the specialty without a dollar down. It starts working at once.

PRODUCES THE CASH TO PAY FOR ITSELF BEFORE PAYMENT DUE

In a few short days, the installation has actually produced cash money that is there and available to pay for itself, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time! The representative calls back, collects his money.

YOUR PROFITS

OUT OF EVERY $75 BUSINESS THE REPRESENTATIVE DOES, NEARLY $60 IS HIS OWN PROFIT! THE SMALLEST HE MAKES IS $5 ON A $7.50 INSTALLATION! And the deal has been made without toil and trouble, without high pressure, without drudgery, without argument! Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves! While others fail to even get a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They are getting the attention of the largest concerns in the country, and selling to the smaller businesses by the thousands. Business is GOOD, in this line, in small town or big city alike! It's on the boom now. Get in while the business is young!

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Either the parent companies, branches, or dealers, etc., of America's foremost concerns are among our customers: Cities Service Oil Co., Great Lakes Fisheries, Inc., Chevrolet, Union Gas Corp., Consolidated Motor Lines Corp., Street Railways Advertising Co., American Life Underwriters, and scores of others nationally known. Thousands of small businesses everywhere; professional businesses; such as universities, newspapers, hospitals, infirmaries, doctors, etc., buy large installations and heavy repeat orders.

CASH PROFIT GUARANTEED

Customer gets signed certificate guaranteeing cash profit on his investment. Very few business men are so foolish as to turn down a proposition guaranteed to pay a profit, with proof from leading concerns that it does pay.

IMPRESSIVE PORTFOLIO OF REFERENCES FROM AMERICA'S LEADING FIRMS CLOSES THE DEAL

You receive a handsome, convincing portfolio containing photographic copies of actual letters reporting cash savings and giving endorsements from concerns whose names are familiar everywhere as representing the very best, the very largest companies. These letters come from every leading type of business and profession. Small as well as large are represented. You immediately forestall the argument, "Doesn't fit my business." All question removed. Shows that it does fit, and does make good. Closes the sale.

START ON SMALL SCALE

You can start small and grow big. You can get exclusive rights. With profits from your first business you can open an office, hire salesmen, branch out into open territory. Exclusive contract enables you to build an established permanent business which can be sold like any other business. Give your customers satisfactory service and they will be your prospects for repeat orders as long as they are in business. Full opportunity for investigation. SEND NOW FOR FULL INFORMATION. Mail the coupon to

TEST THIS BUSINESS WITHOUT RISKING A DOLLAR OF YOUR OWN

You try out this business ABSOLUTELY WITHOUT RISKING A DOLLAR OF YOUR OWN.

COMPLETE TRAINING FURNISHED

Many men with us today started at scratch, without previous experience, many coming out of clerking jobs, many out of small businesses, some out of large concerns. We teach every angle of the business, so we put you in the biggest money-making business of its kind in the country. Can't its possible you all in the limited space available here. Mail the coupon now for full information —nothing to risk, everything to gain.

FIRST CHOICE TO FIRST COMERS- Mail this Coupon NOW!

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TERRITORY FILLED IN ORDER OF APPLICATION

If you are looking for a man-size business, free from worries of other overcrowded lines of work, GET IN TOUCH WITH US AT ONCE. Learn the possibilities now before the franchise for your territory is closed. Use the coupon for convenience. It will bring you full information and our proposition immediately.

MAIL FOR FULL INFORMATION

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Without obligation to me, send me full information on your proposition.

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QUICK TRIGGER WESTERN NOVELS Magazine

Vol. 2, No. 3 — A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE — *August, 1938, Issue*

TWO BIG ACTION NOVELS

Page

Blaze of Six-gun Glory.....by Ken Jason 4

Foreman, top-hand, and employees of the Double N, all rolled into one—that became Stubby's job after ruthless ravages of the mysterious rustler of Valle del Herbaje had swept that rangeland through the hot-lead inferno of Hell itself!

The Riding Kid.....by Norton L. James 78

When those sidewinding bucking-horse judges gave The Riding Kid third money, after every roper, bulldogger, and horse-handler in the arena had thundered tribute, that slab-muscled bronc-buster knew trouble was headed his way—straight out of hell!

TWO THRILLING NOVELETTES

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Blaze of Six-Gun Glory

CHAPTER I

"He'll Make You Prove an Alibi!"

THE little cowboy pulled up when he saw Brad Brennan riding toward the gates of the Double N. He was frowning.

"'Lo, Brennan."

"Howdy, Stubby," Brennan pulled up. He looked at the little man. "There was shooting last night, down by my creek somewhere. Hear any echoes?"

"Yeh," Stubby studied his saddle horn. "It was Sam Lagen; somebody plugged him in the dark. We was chasin' some yearlin's somebody was drivin' off." Stubby sighed, still avoiding Brennan's eyes. "Makes me foreman, tophand and employees o' the Double N, all rolled into one."

He was silent. Brennan's eyes narrowed. At last he drew a long breath. Stubby looked up.

"And they got away, too, eh? That must have been down where the creek crosses my land," Brennan said slowly.

"Yeh, it was on yore land, Brad. The yearlin's went that way." He fumbled with his bridle. "Goin' up to see Miss

by KEN JASON

Author of "Six-Gun Thunder," etc.

Joan. Old man's gone to town."

Brennan considered. Then he gave a quick nod. "I think so," he said. "I heard the shooting and rode out right afterward but I didn't find anything. I'll take a look in on Sam."

Stubby, accepting this as a welcome end to the conversation, turned his mount, and rode west by south, toward the sloping valley where the Double N herd was grazing.

Even without the troubled frown that he wore as he trotted off, Brad Brennan's face might never have been handsome. It was too deeply bronzed and stern. His jaw was clean and his mouth and eyebrows were straight lines. His gray eyes seemed always to be looking directly ahead. Tall and powerful he sat his saddle, wide batwing chaps flapping as he rode, swinging easily with his mount. But that was the only ease in his manner.

Stubby's news had struck hard. Riding up the sandy pathway, he saw Joan Walters on the veranda of the ranchhouse. He circled the bunk-house and drew up before the steps below her.

The mysterious gun-crazy rustler of Valle Del Herbaje had struck once again—this time to lose Brad Brennan his best friend and his sweetheart, and to wipe out to a man, tophand, foreman, and crew of the Double N!

He smiled hopefully. When Brennan smiled it was usually a revelation. His face seemed always so set and stern that there was a keen, delightful surprise in watching the flash of white, even teeth against the hard tan of his face. But there was no answering smile for him this morning.

As though she had divined that he might come up, and was anxious to avoid even a semblance of welcome, Joan Walters got out of her chair uncrossing slim, booted legs and striding down the steps with the grace of a boy. She halted at the head of Brennan's mount. For a moment she studied him. He could sense instinctively the change in her manner.

"How's Sam?" he asked defensively. "Stubby just told me."

"He'll live," replied the girl briefly.

SHE looked at him defiantly for a moment. Then she looked away. Dark, curling lashes swept the sun tanned bloom of her cheeks. Brennan saw her red lips tremble for an instant; her eyes, troubled, dwelt on the way the sunlight toyed with the gold glints of her tawny hair.

Suddenly she caught her breath, her blue eyes widened, and she swung back to him impulsively. "Oh, I suppose I shouldn't—shouldn't feel this way, Brad! But there've been so many things lately. Why can't you do something—at least, speak?"

"But Joan, I don't care what they say."

"They're saying plenty," she averred. "Uncle's gone to town, or you wouldn't be standing here. Can't you—where *were* you last night, anyway? Do you realize they stopped in at your house after that shot hit Sam Lagen? And found you weren't there!"

Brennan's face suddenly froze. "So that's it!" he breathed tensely. "I knew they were talking, but I didn't think you'd listen. Good Lord, Joan, don't they realize that my stock's been run off, too?"

"Not a lot of it," she replied—and then bit her lip. There was a certain unwilling contrition in her manner. Joan Walters was a self reliant type, cool and steady. She had spent most of her life in the Southwest. Yet beside Brad Brennan she was tiny, and seemed completely feminine and helpless. A sense of the bigness and the cool, vibrant strength of him could not escape her as they stood there.

"I know," she murmured after a pause. "I should be the last even to listen. Maybe it's just that I'm angry that they talk so—and a little angry with you because you never speak, never seem to care what men say."

"But I don't care!" he interrupted with a laugh. "What's worse, when I stop to figure it out, I can almost convince myself that I *am* the mysterious rustler of Valle del Herbaje!"

She realized that he had said nothing of where he had been in the dead of the night before, when her uncle and Stubby, after the foreman had been hit, rode to Brennan's ranch-house and found it deserted. The three men had ridden out when their Chinese cook, running up from the bunkhouse, had sworn in chattering accents that cattle were moving under the stars. They had come up with the raiders in the dark at the place where the creek crossed the Square D, Brennan's property, and had been met with a fusillade.

"Uncle swears that he'll make you prove an alibi," Joan said softly. "Or —or admit—"

"Why, naturally! I heard the shooting. Jim Garen and I rode out different ways. I started for the stock and he went towards the creek."

He hesitated, aware that they were

not alone, and wary. They had been so absorbed that neither had noticed the rider, who, lowering the bars at the fence below, came riding up the trail.

It was Joan's look which warned Brennan. He saw her eyes, startled at first, fixed beyond him. Then they were instantly wide and resentful and a slow flush stained her cheeks. He whirled.

The newcomer looked distinctly out of place in the range country. Almost as tall as Brennan, he was slim as a girl. That he was not a native Westerner was apparent in a glance. He wore neat whipcord breeches, pegged, and his slim legs and trim feet were encased in polished, soft riding boots. Under a stiff brimmed Stetson his face was dark and boldly handsome—keen, cynical black eyes, a small black mustache, and a laughing, bitter mouth.

Though the eyes were laughing, they were frankly ardent, too. Worshipping. Joan's flush deepened as the man sat looking at her. His smile was enraging.

Suddenly he swept off his hat with a gesture. "Good morning!" he said in a low, cultured voice. "I'm afraid I don't know all the etiquette of the occasion. How do I go about applying for a job as a—a hand?"

The girl's head came up resentfully under the boldness of his eyes. "Not that way!" she retorted quickly. "For the first thing, you get off your horse and look as though it's really work you want!"

The mocking, delicate eyebrows rose, but the smile did not disappear. Brennan found his fists clenched.

CHAPTER II

"I Don't Want You to Come Back!"

THE stranger swung off his mount with little ease. He gave a brief bow. In another man in that setting the bow would have been ludicrous. Brennan suddenly found it pitiable. Yet the stranger was not one easily to excite pity—at least, not intentionally.

"My name is Groman—Josef Groman," he announced coolly. "I understood you were shorthanded here, and—"

"Where'd you hear that?" Brennan interrupted.

Groman gave him a mocking smile. "In Bociera—yesterday. I saw Miss Walters in the street and immediately tried to find out if the Double N might not be shorthanded. I understood it might be."

"It's not!" Joan Walters said briefly. "And when it is, we use cowpunchers. This is a ranch, Mr. Groman, not a fashionable horse show!"

Brennan straightened, aware suddenly of how deeply the girl resented this man's arrogant admiration. At her words, stinging and hard, Groman's smile left him for an instant; the mocking lips took on new bitterness. He gave his jerky, little bow and turned back to his horse.

"That is unfortunate," he said, low voiced. "It would not interest mademoiselle to know that I should have to work before I could buy more suitable clothes. Good morning!"

He rode off. They watched his straight back as he sat his saddle. His spine was like a ramrod.

"Cavalry," Brennan grunted to himself.

For a moment Joan's eyes were clouded. Her swift transitions from

annoyance and anger to sudden contrition had always puzzled and charmed Brennan. But now she turned upon him in quick fury. "He was insulting—insulting!" she exclaimed. "An arrogant little prig! I expected you might say something, Brad!"

He stared. "But there was nothing to say! He came to you for a job. For the rest, I was more sorry for the poor devil than anything else. That chap's seen better days."

"Of course he has! A remittance man, probably. He isn't the first to reach this country. Thrown out for misbehavior at home somewhere and—and thinking girls in the West are simply savages who ought to be glad of his casual interest."

Her cheeks burned. Brennan had not considered it seriously before but he began to understand how the man's bold admiration had infuriated her. He knew Groman's type well enough himself—yet, strangely, it had been impossible to visualize anyone who could look at Joan with anything but worship.

He commenced to stammer out his vague thoughts when he was interrupted again by the clatter of hoofs. This time it was Roaring Walters, owner of Double N, who pounded fiercely through the open gate at sight of Brennan, red faced and bleak eyed. Swinging from the saddle, he halted belligerently before the visitor, a small, wizened little man with a swaggering, bullying manner.

"What you doin' on this ranch, Brad Brennan?" he shot out.

Brennan frowned. "I—heard about Sam—"

"*Heard* about 'm!" Walters interrupted. "Yeh, reckon yuh must've heard about him—long ago. Maybe yuh heard about Harry Holt's Comet horses, too? Brennan, yuh ain't wanted around the Double N, *by night or day*—and until they've got yuh where y' belong, I'll trouble yuh to keep away."

Brennan had been calm for a long time. His instinct had been to call Groman to a halt, but he had refrained. He had a bad reputation with the two guns that hung at his hips; and somehow, to force a fight with the young foreigner, under the circumstances, might have seemed like bullying.

Then there was Joan's anger. And now old Walters, who had long disliked him. Brennan felt that he had stood almost enough.

"I'll go, Walters, if you feel that way," he said softly. "But I reckon you've been in this country long enough to know it's not safe to toss around insinuations like that."

Walters snarled. His hands rested on his thin hips, from one of which an aged six-shooter dangled. "I been in this country long enough to know you better git out of it!" he cried. "That's what some o' the boys in town are thinkin' too. Yuh better git those Comet hosses out o' sight across the border pronto, too—'cause there's a posse out lookin' for 'em right now—an' for you, too!"

Brennan scarcely heard the information. His gray eyes were slits of blank steel. He drew a quick breath. "Yo're only safe for so long, Walters," he said tensely. "Even here. I've taken enough. The next word you got to say about horsethievin'—*say it with your hand reaching for your gun!*"

WALTERS met those deadly blank eyes and calmed. He gave a sneer, hesitated a moment, and then stumped up the steps. "Reckon I ain't hankerin' to follow Sam Lagen," he said. "Just git goin', Brennan; I reckon there's some'll take care o' you—right pronto!"

Brennan stood white faced and silent. Then, without looking at Joan, he turned and swung heavily into his saddle. Walters reached the top of the

steps. As Brennan turned his mount's head, he heard a quick breath and looked down to find Joan standing at his stirrup.

Her face was white. Her eyes blazed. For a moment they stared at one another. Brennan had feared this; he had avoided looking at her because he knew what he would see.

"I don't want you to come back!" she told him with cold, resolute distinctness. "You didn't show any signs of being anxious for gunplay when that —that person was here. But you're ready enough with threats for an old man. Goodby, Brad Brennan!"

That was all. She turned away and left him, running hurriedly up the steps as though fearful he might call her back. Brennan stared after her with dead, lifeless eyes; and then, when she and her uncle had gone inside, he picked up his reins and started away.

CHAPTER III

"They're Out for Blood!"

BRENNAN had long years since, formed the habit of silence. He seldom swore. His stern features gave no sign of emotion. Except for the brooding dejection which slumped his wide shoulders, he might have been the same man who had ridden in the opposite direction an hour earlier, as he took his way along the south trail toward his ranch.

Though he had paid no attention to Walter's mention of the Comet horses at the time, the fact that Harry Holt was missing some of his excellent stock made a deep impression. It but added to the other things. From time to time, Brennan turned expressionless thoughtful eyes southward toward the looming mesa and the canyon mouth that brooded beyond the dancing heat waves there.

He had long known that he was the object of suspicion in Valle del Herbaje; but he did not blame Walters alone for the distrust that was growing. Inside the canyon mouth lived the man who had pointed out from the first that Brad Brennan must be the mysterious rustler of the valley. It was logical enough; Mulrew was not alone in his opinion; but Brennan found it hard to account for the wealthy mine owner's venom toward him.

Mulrew was a man heard with respect. The richest man in the territory, owner of a highly productive gold mine in the canyon, he ruled Bociera and the surrounding territory with an iron grip. Feared and disliked, Mulrew still was respected for his cold, ruthless power. The mine had, years before, proved too difficult to be worked by its Spanish owners. Mulrew had forced it to pay well by sheer, brutal tenacity and courage.

On the other hand, Brad Brennan was no one in particular. As he had admitted to Joan, at times when he figured it out, he could almost convince himself that he was doing the rustling in the valley. He owned a small herd, boasted a single employee, had proved his draw and the right to wear two guns if he chose. Beyond that, he was a stranger, and suspected of being in debt.

The creek along which the stolen cattle had been driven off the night before, crossed Brennan's land before it lost itself somewhere under the walls of the mountain, southward where the canyon mouth met the mesa. Beyond lay the border.

But this had not been the first raid on Walter's cattle—nor on Brennan's, either. Fortunately, a month before, Brennan had herded a large consignment to Carlton Center, and he had not

yet reinvested the proceeds of that sale in New Stock. So his herd was small. It had seemed at that time as though the Square Deal might begin to pay sizable dividends at last. Brennan had been hopeful. And there was Joan.

Then the rustling began in what had been a quiet, sleepy valley undisturbed for years.

Brennan had suffered first. Twice small cuts of his herd had disappeared in the night without a sign. Then Walters' stock began to vanish. Walters had more to levy on.

Below, past the edge of Brennan's land, around the foothills sprouting east of the canyon, was the border; quick turnover and ready pay, with brand marks not analyzed. The cattle could have gone in no other direction, for northward was the sparse rim of the hills, and beyond them the desert. Westward lay Carlton Center, and only a single trail with one watering place. South there was only the canyon trail that led to Mulrew's mine. Even Brennan knew that, in spite of Mulrew's persecution of him, it was folly to suspect that a man of his wealth should be interested in cattle stealing on a small scale.

Brennan had come to the peaceful Valle del Herbaje a year before, and he had bought the Square D, with its crescent moon brand and his own initial between the tips. He invested what little money he had in stock, hired Jim Garen, and went to work.

Silent, uncommunicative, hard working—few men knew anything of Brennan beyond the fact that he was there. If he had one friend in Bociera, it was Lou Moore, deputy sheriff — deputy sheriff because, as he put it, "If yuh prove once or twice that yuh can use yore gun, it's the softest job in the country."

But even Moore knew little of him. Brennan drank only seldom; his appearances in town were few. If he had few friends, he had as few enemies. People were not prone to dislike a man who could use two guns, worked hard, and minded his own business.

BUT the rustling provoked the ranchers to action. An investigation committee was formed, with Mulrew, owner of the canyon mine, at its head. Maps were studied. Geography proved a lot. At the end, Brennan was summoned before the committee for questioning.

His contemptuous disregard for the summons was a nine day wonder. He did not even refuse to appear; he might never have received the crudely constructed note. The old-timers blinked, coughed, spat—and then realized that they could not make him stand before then and answer questions.

But Brennan had made himself talked about. Arlen Mulrew demanded justice; and saw in Brennan's refusal to stand an unofficial investigation practical proof that he was the mysterious rustler who had descended on the valley. And Mulrew's word meant a lot. But as Brennan's cattle had been run off with the rest, and as there was nothing but suspicion the matter had to end there.

The rustling went on. Then Double N cattle had been chased into Square D Creek, headed toward the border, and Sam Lagen had been shot in the dark there. And the Comet horses—

Brennan shook his head, glanced toward the red tinted walls of the canyon mouth, and turned off toward his own ranch.

Jim Garen, his face white under a mass of freckles, ran out, buckling on his gunbelt and met him at the corrals.

"How'd yuh get here—cut across?"

Brennan nodded gloomily, absorbed in his thoughts.

"Good yuh did!" Garen swore. "Git

goin'. They took the main trail to the Double N—after you!"

"Who?"

"The posse! Lanyski's headin' it—that gun-fanner workin' over with Mulrew at the mine. They found Harry Holt's stolen horses down under the willows at the creek."

"On our land?" Brennan demanded.

"Nothin' less. Hell, don't ask me how they got there, Brad! I know as much as you do about it. Just get goin'. They're out for blood!"

"Was Harry Holt with them?"

"No. He's with a searchin' party up in the hills. They'll quiet later; but right now—take a trip to the hills, Brad. Hole up. I'll mind the ranch. Ain't nothin' to look after, anyhow. Then come back day after tomorrow and straighten out with Harry. He won't believe you did that job."

Brennan outwardly was impassive. But his dark face had become stonier than ever. He rolled a cigarette thoughtfully while Garen stared up at him with imploring eyes.

"Go on, Brad, will yuh?"

"I'm going. Not to the hills, though—in to Bociera. Watch things; I may not be back right away."

Leaving his lone employe gaping with astonishment, Brennan turned his mount and started at a loping gallop eastward to the village.

CHAPTER IV

"Better Get in Yore Cell, Amigo!"

LOU MOORE was studying thoughtfully the manner in which Dick Kenton's latest brand of Bourbon clung to the side of the pony glass he had filled, when Brad Brennan strolled quietly through the doorway of Kenton's Continental hotel and saloon. The place was almost completely empty, and the cool shadows of early afternoon were inviting. The worn tables, the cracked, heat warped floor, the bar that was the pride of Bociera in its mahogany magnificence, all were part of lazy, somnolent Bociera as it had been before the last few hectic weeks.

Brennan halted. "The p o i n t," Moore was observing to the world in general, "is not so much a matter o' the liquor's quality, as it is a matter o' my in-equality—"

He rambled off, for the bartender was looking over his shoulder with interested eyes. Lou Moore turned, his hand slipping with careless ease toward his belt. Before this, the lean, lantern jawed Moore had proved that leaning against a bar did not spoil a good shooter's aim, or lessen the speed of his draw. His lazy mask was an asset.

He grunted at sight of Brennan and turned triumphantly to his audience of one behind the bar. "Hell! What'd I tell yuh, Dick? Didn't I tell the world in general that if anybody really wanted Brad Brennan f'r anything, the best bet was to wait in my office?" He whirled. "Yuh been to my office, ain't yuh, Brad?"

"Empty," Brennan averred. "Busy?"

"Not so very. Ramsey's over at Carlton Center, picking up information. I'm sheriff today," Moore considered his friend. "Brad, they was pretty sure they was going to find you an' them Comet hosses in the same cache."

Brennan was serious. "They found 'em on my land, Lou," he said softly. "Understand Lanyski's leadin' a posse out after me now."

Moore's watery blue eyes widened. He surveyed Brennan with thoughtful care. "After yuh! Lanyski!" Then he let out a guffaw. "So yuh come here! He turned to the loungers in the Continental and again confirmed his predictions. "Didn't I tell 'em where

to look for Brad Brennan—guilty 'r not guilty?"

It was a friendly crowd. "They're after yuh hot, Brennan," said one wizened little fellow. "Mulrew got 'em all worked up, an' Lanyski said he'd stake his pay they'd find the Comet string wherever you were. Yuh better not let 'em find yuh while their dander's up."

Brennan nodded and turned again to Moore. "I wasn't quite sure what it meant," he said quietly. "Lanyski led this gang, eh—for me?"

"Plenty. I'd 'a' gone, Brad, but I didn't think there was a chance o' them connectin' you with this. Why, old man Walters was in this mornin'—"

"I know. I saw him." Brennan met Moore's eyes. "Harry Holt won't believe I'm in this, Lou. What shall I do?"

A horse slid to his haunches in front of the hitching rack, and a rider bounded into the Continental. "They found th' hosses!" he began, blinking at the unaccustomed shadows. He met Brennan's eyes. His jaw fell. "Hell—they're chasin' him now!"

"What're they going to do to him?" Moore asked in a voice that was suddenly cold and hard.

The rider gulped. "Why, string 'im, I s'pose!"

"And Holt don't even know they found his hosses?"

"This is Lanyski an' the gang, Moore. Holt's up in the hills."

Before anyone could move, Moore had whipped out his .45 with a swift motion. It was in Brennan's ribs. For a second there was a dead silence. Brennan and the deputy met eye to eye, and Moore's eyes never faltered.

"Reckon I'm puttin' yuh under arrest, Brad," he said quietly. "I plumb hope yuh don't object, 'cause I mean it."

There was a space of silence. Then Brennan nodded. "It's your game, Lou. Go ahead," he said. Moore jerked his head toward the door. "Out," he ordered. "We're marchin' to the hoosegow."

In a dead silence, the two went out. The gaping loungers stared after them. In the sheriff's office, which was the street front before the tin roofed jail, Moore dropped into a chair and slipped the gun back in its holster. He waved his hand toward the three cells which opened on a narrow corridor emerging from the rear of the office.

"Take yore pick, Brad. That last one's comfortable; I slept there one night. There's no entrance from the rear—this is a plumb up to date jail—and I reckon I can take care of anybody comes in the front way, when Lanyski's gang gets back."

BRENNAN nodded shortly. "What's your idea now?"

"None—yet." Moore's eyes were suddenly keen and bright. "There's dirty work here, Brad. I think it's best for you to be under arrest. I'd have to do it, anyhow; and there's got to be a trial. But there won't be no trial if yuh ever get in Lanyski's hands—or Mulrew's. Son, I heard them two when they started out today—and I've heard 'em before."

Brennan started to roll a cigarette, and he dropped coolly on the edge of Sheriff Ramsey's scarred desk. "What's the idea, Lou? Why is Mulrew after me? And why is his new gunman employee leading a posse to lynch me?"

Moore snorted. "Think that's an original question, Brad? S'pose I haven't wondered that? It was Lanyski who got 'em worked up today; Lanyski who volunteered to lead that gang in yore direction."

"Know anything about him?"

Moore shook his head. "Better get in yore cell, *amigo*." He got up. "There's some riders comin' in; I

wouldn't be surprised if it was Lanyski's crowd. Keep yore gun."

He swung suddenly on his friend, and the annoyance was written plain on his homely, serious features. "Next thing you'll be drivin' me cuckoo by askin' why Mulrew hates yuh. Don't think I ain't seen it? But—it's no good, Brad. Mulrew ain't stealin' cattle. That's real gold in his mine, and I had that proved before I'd believe it. No, the rustlin's comin' from somewhere else. As a matter o' fact," he continued aggrievedly, "I can't see who it'd be but *you*, Brad!"

Brennan smiled as he turned away. "That's one point where you and Mulrew and I agree. Neither can I!" he said.

CHAPTER V

"He's Got to Get Out!"

LOU MOORE was not drinking; but he was looking aggrievedly at the world from his position at the end of the Continental bar. Brad Brennan had been in jail for one day; the first prisoner in the months of Lou's term of office. And keeping him there had not been easy. Only a reputation as a gun thrower had held off Lanyski's crowd the day before, until Harry Holt arrived in Bociera. Sheriff Ramsey was still in Carlton Center on his mysterious errand. And worst, Lanyski had not yet been attended to. Lou was beginning to regret that a deputy cannot engage in necessary shooting.

His narrowed eyes were on Lanyski at the moment. The man was a born gunman. His build and carriage suggested a heavy, flexed spring, except for the heavy, crouched over shoulders that made him look like a gorilla always ready to leap. His thick eyebrows lowered, he was talking fast across one of the Continental tables in a corner, to a group of five men. Lou Moore knew without being told that that conversation was weaving trouble for him—and Brennan.

A man entered the dark doorway. Moore sighed a little with relief when he recognized Harry Holt, the young and grave faced owner of the Comet. Not that Harry's presence made any difference; but here, at least, was no enemy.

Harry crossed quickly to where the deputy lounged acidly. His keen cool eyes took in Lanyski's group in a flash. "Brennan still in jail?" he demanded.

Moore nodded. "Yeh. He will be, as long as that gang's around. Hell, does Mulrew pay that gunfanner to sit around Bociera all the time, stirrin' up trouble?"

Harry seldom smiled. He glanced quickly at Lanyski again. "Maybe he does; *quien sabe?* I've got all my horses back but two, Lou. Naturally, that wasn't Brennan's work. Any man of sense 'd know that if he was stealin' horses, he wouldn't leave 'em on his own property."

"What's the answer?" Lou looked belligerent. "If you say somethin' about maybe Mulrew's crooked, I'll shoot, so help me—"

"Forget it. We've all thought of that, but it's impossible. Mulrew hates Brennan; that's all. Maybe he wants to buy the Square D; that's the worst there can be to this. But something else's happened. I just saw Garen. Some more o' Brennan's stock has been run off."

"What?" Lou jerked upright.

"Yeh. 'Bout sundown. Garen was home eatin'. Lou, Brennan's got to get out o' jail."

"But he—"

"There's something else. Those hombres are plannin' a lynchin' bee." He jerked his head to where Lanyski sat.

"Theyre sayin' I'm a fool and they're takin' the law in their own hands, since yo're a friend o' Brennan's. He's got to get out, Lou."

"But where'll he go? Hell, I'm not holdin' him because I need rent for that cell!"

Harry nodded. "I know. But I've got faith in Brennan. He'll take care of himself. Mind gettin' held up for a jail delivery tonight?"

Lou considered. He rubbed a finger down the length of his nose, and then nodded. "Come on down t' the office," he said.

Brennan met them calmly. He had seen Holt the day before; not from the first had he doubted that Holt would believe him. Lying at full length on a very comfortable cot, Brennan let blue smoke sift through his nostrils while Harry Holt told briefly what he knew. Then the owner of Square D got to his feet.

"I'm going," he announced crisply. "You can say what you want, Lou. This is Mulrew's work. I'll agree there's no visible reason; but he's back of it."

"But Mulrew ain't rustlin'!" Lou protested. "Why should he? I tell yuh, that's real ore comes out o' the canyon mine, and plenty of it! It's always been there. What need's he got for rustlin' cows?"

"None," Mulrew agreed. "But—does the trail from this side run all the way through the mountain? If it does, it comes out in Mexico."

"No one's ever been through there," Holt said. "Mulrew's house straddles the trail, and the mines are beyond." He shook his head. "No; I see what yo're thinkin' Brennan! but it brings us back to the beginnin'! There might be a trail through that canyon—all the way. But I know! I've found out like Lou has; there's real gold in there, plenty of it. I don't know how it's worked, but it's a real mine. And there's too much of it for Mulrew to even think of rustlin'. It'd be like a New York millionaire sellin' shoelaces for spendin' money."

Brennan heard him out. Then he nodded. "Of course," he agreed. "We've got to get another answer. But whatever the answer is, I'm going to find it. Mulrew and his gang have put me into the wall, and I don't like to stay that way." He touched his two pistol butts significantly. "I think I can get the drop on you, Lou. Do I go peaceable?"

Lou swore. "Pardner, if I had any money, I'd pay yuh to go. This jail ain't been home since you've been a prisoner!"

CHAPTER VI

"Get Him!"

BRENNAN rode alone. It was a black night, with no sign of a moon, but scarcely blacker than his thoughts.

He tried not to think of Joan. He dared not blame her. It was too easy to see what she had seen. He knew that she had spoken as the result of a momentary passion, yet it gave him no comfort. In the society of her uncle, knowing all that was known of Brad Brennan, her attitude would scarcely alter.

There was a wistful little smile on the man's hard mouth as he rode. A smile few who knew him would have recognized, as his eyes took in the familiar shape of the mesa bulking huge in the southward dark, the willows at the creek against the white sand where the desert crept in, the huge towering front of the canyon mouth. Everything was quiet. There was peace in the Valle del Herbaje.

Peace. He recalled that day, a month since, when he had pocketed the cash from his shipment westward. There had been hopes then, mighty plans. The Square D could pay; he had proved it. He had proved himself, too. Out of a life in which he had done little of which he was proud, he was beginning to make good.

There was Joan, and a chance at the future. Brennan had envisioned the Square D as a setting for that future. A large ranch, modern and equipped well. Himself happy with his work and his life—and Joan there. For a month ago, he had been certain that some day she would be there. When he was able to tell her that he could offer her some part of what she deserved.

How changed was everything now! Like a ghostly hand, mystery had crept into the valley and in one short month had altered everything.

Brennan's clenched fist struck his saddle horn as he leaned forward, about to turn up toward the Square D ranch house. When suddenly he caught a sound, borne through the rustling willows—a voice. Instinctively he caught his bridle, and even as he did so, the staccato bark of a .45 clove the silence of the night.

On the heels of it came another cry—three more shots. Distantly he saw the red jets of flame, incongruous in the opaque blackness. He heard confusion, calling voices, a cry of pain and agony—another shot! Then running hoofs, many of them, furore.

Brennan tapped his pistol butts and dug in his spurs. He was alone, yet he gave scant consideration. Mystery moved in the valley again tonight; the wind rustling past his cheeks, he tore toward it, bent far over his mount's neck, the mane flying against his face.

Another shot; Brennan mounted a hillock, swooped down into a gully. A cry! Hoofs thundered past in the dark, the willows were alive. Cattle!

Brennan's pistol was out. He charged for the dim mass of figures that he saw; the horse plunged to its fetlocks in the shallow stream.

A shot banged out—a strange voice. He felt the lead sing past his head. Then his right gun came up and sent four shots into the moving mass of figures.

"Get 'im—Brennan!"

Another shot! Brennan reached the farther side of the stream and realized that he was a mark for bullets. He slipped sidewise out of the saddle, fired again, and felt the air filled with a wild fusillade of lead. He crouched. The cattle thundered by, vanished. Riders cried out to each other.

Brennan knew not where to shoot, but he was no fool. To attempt to attack whoever was ahead, was folly. He took the trunk of a cottonwood for cover and waited, reloading calmly, intending to wait and then follow. It should not be too difficult.

A moment of silence. A piece of singing lead clipping through the leaves—from a distance, this time. Brennan held his breath. Who was waiting? What lay in the palpitating dark ahead there?"

Suddenly a groan came to his ears, a cry that was broken off in accents of agony. He whirled. Something writhed on the ground behind him. Brennan flung himself to the edge of the creek beside the body of a man. He felt blood, warm and sticky, as he touched a perspiring forehead. Then he gave a sharp exclamation.

"Walters!" he cried.

HE forgot that there might be men waiting among the trees for a sign of him. He forgot that Walters hated him. Brennan knew that his arms held a man who was dying in pain. He felt for the wound, and found a red spot in Walters' chest beside the wound in his

forehead—a shot which had streaked across the skull and which alone might not have been fatal.

He threw water on Walters' face. The old rancher moaned, grunted. He murmured indistinguishable words. Brennan heard him say:

"You—"

He splashed more water into the wizened features. "It's Brennan, Walters!" he cried. "Try and talk. You must know now I'm all right. They were shooting at me—"

He stopped. Walters' eyes gleamed through the dark. The lips moved in a little sound. "Yeh. I know—now. Finish, Brennan. Help—Joan. Sorry. It was—"

Brennan bent forward. Just one more word, only one. "It was—" His whole being was tensed as though he could give that last spark of strength to the dying man in his arms. And then Walters' little figure stiffened, he coughed. He was dead.

Brennan clenched his teeth on a groan.

A long time later he stood up, surveyed the familiar place, realized that he was on his own land. It was then that he realized that he would be branded as Roaring Walters' murderer.

CHAPTER VII

"I'll Come Back!"

BRENNAN had spent a sleepless night. He had not dared sleep. The morning was well advanced when his worn pony slid down a sand embankment, mounted a little crest, and halted wearily just above the Double N ranch-house.

No one had arrived there yet. Possibly the body was not yet back. Brennan had sent Jim Garen out with the news. He had met Jim on the way to the ranch, for the cowboy had heard the shooting at the creek. The hills and the desert were being scoured. Brennan had no illusions; he knew that this morning he was branded as a murderer and a rustler as well; that few would disbelieve the assumption that his feud with Walters had come to a head at last. It would be hard to disbelieve, in the face of his escape from jail, in the face of the warnings and rantings of Mulrew and his crowd, and after the denunciations Walters himself must have uttered when last in town.

Brennan's weary eyes took in the bulk of the silent ranch-house. Would she believe? He remembered Walters' words.

Lifelessly he picked up his reins and let the pony amble along. He had no plans. He had not dared to think of them in the night. He wanted to see Joan first. He was not afraid of Stubby. Stubby would have to be convinced that Brennan had killed his boss. And the only other employe of the shorthanded Double N was in bed with a bullet wound.

Joan emerged from the rear door on the heels of the little Chinese cook. She had a bucket in her hand. As she caught sight of Brennan, his back to the saffron skyline, riding slowly toward her, the bucket dropped. The Oriental took one look and dove through the screen door.

Joan stood pallid and very brave when Brennan halted. Steady eyes, deep in misery, searched his face. He could tell nothing of her thoughts.

"Do you—I had to see you, Joan," Brennan said hoarsely. "You—you've heard about it, of course."

She nodded. "Jim Garen came over. The sheriff's on his way from Carlton Center, and—and there's a posse."

"For me?" His little smile was bitter.

"So they said," she replied simply.

Brennan towered over her and she could see the deep, worn lines in his face, the misery in his eyes.

"I don't know whether I'll let them get me or not," he said slowly. "It depends. I came—came to find out, Joan. Do you believe—this? Any of it?"

She studied him. He could sense the strain she was under, the agony that repression cost her. She was suffering from pent up emotions that must soon be loosed or she would be in hysteria.

"Does it matter?" she began; and then he saw her lips tremble and the suspicion of a tear on her long lashes. She burst out, "Oh, don't ask me! Don't ask me anything! How can I know? I can't think! Please go away, Brad—please!"

He stood silent. "All right, Joan," he breathed, after a moment.

Wide eyed, quivering, she reached out her hands in an impulsive gesture. "Don't let them find you, Brad—for my sake!" She could read the decision in his eyes. "Please don't. After—when this is over, give me a chance to think. Oh, Brad, I'm so lonely all of a sudden! Do you suppose I want to believe this?"

He nodded gravely. "All right, Joan. I'll come back."

Suddenly a new purpose came into his eyes. The dejection left him. "If I can once get free of them, I'm going to find out what all this means!"

He rode away. There was no more to be said. Just as he turned into the lower trail southward, Joan saw a file of riders crest the ridge over which he had come. But he was out of sight. The men drove their weary ponies down toward the ranch-house.

All that day riders wound across ridges. Bociera was deserted. From the west, Sheriff Ramsey was returning post haste, but he had not yet arrived. The roads were being scoured. The border was being watched, but it was generally believed by mid-day that Brad Brennan had got across the line before daylight.

"I hope he has," grunted Lou Moore, as a tired group of seven men paced their mounts dejectedly across a dusty, sand swept trail barely distinguishable, heading toward a dried arroyo.

Moore rode last, carelessly. But from the beginning he had attached himself to Lanyski and his gang. There were two more of Mulrew's employes among the seven men, and the gun-fanner rode ahead. He turned at Moore's words, murderous blue-gray eyes fixed upon the deputy out of an expressionless face carven with set lines of mingled weariness and purpose.

"Yeuh, it'll save trouble, Moore, if he has. When we see that hombre this time, he ain't goin' to have no chance to *escape* from jail!"

"Meanin' just what?" Moore drawled easily.

"Meanin'," sneered Lanyski, "that I'm right glad the sheriff's comin' back. Only, if I find Brennan first, even Ramsey won't have a chance at him." A low growl came from the throats of his adherents.

MOORE puffed at a cigarette long since gone out.

"That's liable to mean shootin', Lanyski, talkin' that way. 'Cause as a deputy sheriff, it's my duty to see that Brennan stands a fair trial. Did yuh ever happen to think—any o' you prairie dogs—that we ain't even had a coroner's jury yet. There's no law says Walters was murdered!"

Lanyski laughed harshly. "No law but this law," he said, and slapped his two guns.

They rode on in a weary silence, too weary even to quarrel. Moore kept his eyes on Moore's back. One at a time they wound into the arroyo. Trees hid them as they filed through. Moore

came last and jerked up his head soundlessly as a pebble struck between his shoulder blades.

"Cincha's loose," he grunted wearily to the man ahead of him, and dismounted, fumbling with a buckle. The rest passed on. He surveyed the arroyo.

"All right, Brad," he drawled. "Reckon yuh can come out."

"They might be watching," came a voice from behind a rotted stump covered with scraggly bush. "What's the best way to get away, Lou?"

"Hole up till night. Cut across the border about tomorrow daylight," Moore said easily. "Yuh can't make it right now, and they're scourin' all the country. Desert's the only safe place. Got any money?"

"Had no chance. Holt knows where it is, but I can't get back."

"Meet me here, just before daybreak," Moore said. Then he swore. "Hell, Brad, that Lanyski's suspicious. If yuh got a horse, here, get goin'—pronto! If yuh haven't, take mine! He's coming back!"

There was a wild scramble among the bushes. Evidently Brennan had his horse further down the arroyo bed. Moore, dropping his useless cigarette, with a wrench broke the end of his cincha and stood there swearing picturesquely when Lanyski burst into the glade.

The eyes of the two men met. Lanyski turned with a triumphant, vengeful look.

"Scatter, boys!" he said. "And ride! Reckon we're on a hot trail this time." He slapped his mount's rump with his sombrero. "Here's luck with that cincha, *Moore!*"

CHAPTER VIII

"Outlaw, Eh?"

THE cantina was called the Line Rest, though it was owned by a Mexican. It was at the point where two trails met, and at the point where the trails ran closest to the shallow stream that crossed the International Line under the shadow of the Sierras del Bedia. A sleepy little place, patronized on rare occasions by wandering riders who happened that way in search of strays, or by travellers on one of the roads. To such as these it might have borne Kenton's title of Continental, for the trails were only harder sand and the foothills of the Sierras westward might have been a mirage. Desert stretched south to where a stream emerged and crossed the border at a crooked, careless angle. The Line Rest was the only sign of shade or shelter in miles of sweltering desert, where, if cattle strayed, they were doomed.

In a tiny room in the rear of this cantina sat Josef Groman. Groman's hand held a leather dice cup, and there was a tall glass of uniced whiskey and water in front of him. His shirt was open. His hair was in disarray. He sprawled carelessly and sat eyeing the dice-cup.

"Oiga!"

His fist pounded on the table. A peon boy hastened in and closed the door, giving a momentary glimpse of the quiet shadows of a bar and of old Ricardo leaning in his favorite posture across its top, staring out over the heat-hazed desert. Four times that day riders had paused before the cantina and demanded of Ricardo if a lone Americano had been there. They had seen Groman and passed him by contemptuously.

Groman studied the boy grimly and then held out the dice-cup. The *muchacho* stood in evident awe of this mad *caballero* who had decided he would stay at Ricardo's place.

"You will cast these for me, Enrique," Groman said. He was smiling; the boy shivered at the smile. "If I cast them myself I might change the decision."

"*Si Senor.*"

"Probably," Groman said grimly, "you will never have a more important task in your sun-baked existence. For if the first roll is highest, a man dies. Have you any idea who the man will be?"

"*No, Senor.*"

"Of course not. If the second roll is highest, a man loses his pride, humbles himself before a beautiful lady, and tries to be honest by doing filthy work."

"*Si Senor.*"

"And if the third roll is highest—*oiga, muchacho*—our friend, El Latigazo, across the line, gains a most excellent friend and *segundo*. Of course you don't understand."

"No, Senor, but I—"

"It isn't necessary. Please roll these dice. Three rolls. And say neither yes nor no any more."

The boy took the cup in trembling hands. Manifestly this strange looking man was truly mad. A revolver muzzle slipped through the jalousies of the half opened window.

"You will remain as you are, *amigo*—or get shot!"

Brennan's chaps came over the sill and he sat there. His shirt was torn and his face was streaked with sweat and sand. He showed every evidence of having ridden hard and long, and in his eyes was a deadly, hunted look.

Groman stared without outward surprise. Then recognition leapt into his eyes. "It's Brennan!" he exclaimed. "They've been hunting you!"

"Exactly." Brennan was not friendly. "They got my horse and they'll be here in a minute or two. It happens to be a matter of killing someone else or dying myself. I hope you understand that. I want to hide when they come."

He nodded toward the bar. "Ricardo didn't see me come. They'll look in here. I'm going to hide up there." He indicated a dusty shelf slightly higher than a man's head, on which was an old saddle, a saddle bag, some aged newspapers and a few paper-bound books. "I'll have my gun on you," he went on lifelessly, dryly. "When they come, you'll either tell 'em you haven't seen me, or—" He shrugged. "It won't matter, but you'll probably get the first shot."

Groman stared quite imperturbed. Slowly his mocking lips commenced to smile.

"I don't know whether I'll let you shoot me and thus solve the problem—or not," he murmured.

BRENNAN'S head came up. Then, "They're after you—to kill you?" Groman asked.

"Yes."

The foreigner frowned. "Outlaw, eh?" He gave a little laugh. "What superb irony! I think—"

The creak of saddle leather, the jingle of bits came out of the panting stillness of the desert. Brennan got to his feet, his six-gun at his hip. Groman stopped short and raised his head.

"Get up there," he said. "We'll talk afterward." His careless figure suddenly took on life. "You, *muchacho*, roll those dice as I said, and if you say one word I shall probably kill you!"

A moment later the group of men outside could be heard dismounting. A roaring voice bellowed at Ricardo; in the rear room they could hear the little Mexican's chattering denials of all

knowledge. A man poked a head through the window, a pistol preceding him, and grunted as Groman, watching the dice, smiled up at him.

Someone opened the door, swore violently, and a moment later glasses were clinking on the bar. In a little while, the posse had ridden off.

"I think you may come down," Groman said quietly. "The dice seem to have chosen. It would have been bucking fate to let you kill me; it wasn't written that way. Brennan, I'm heading across the border tonight; you'd better come along."

CHAPTER IX

"It Will Be a Dangerous Play!"

IT had taken cautious riding for Brennan and Groman to reach the arroyo where the former had come closest to capture in the long, bitter day of manhunt. It was well after midnight when they got there; and picketing their horses, crouched among the willows and the juniper to wait Moore's arrival.

Brennan had gathered enough about his new found companion to mistrust him. Not that there was any cowardice, or anything sneaking or mean about Groman, as he called himself. On the contrary. Yet, cold bloodedly he would flinch before nothing; nothing mattered but his own ends. Believing neither god nor man, he would be a dangerous, merciless enemy, but a friend only as long as it suited his needs to be so.

"I've got to get out of this country," he told Brennan frankly. "So do you. They haven't anything on me yet, but they will have, when Sheriff Ramsey gets back. He's been getting my record, and I happen to be wanted by a sheriff outside of Yuma. I ought to have known better than to attempt a holdup; but I had little choice."

He spoke calmly, coolly, as though his only regret lay in his own blundering of the job. A man had been killed, but that was unimportant.

"I had to have money, you see," he said with a shrug. "I've been accustomed to it. You've gathered that I'm not from this country. I'm not. My right name is Von Steglitz and I was a cavalry officer. I can never go back home. That's all you'll need to know and all you will know, Brennan."

Brennan nodded carelessly. "The point is, what do we do in Mexico?" he said. "I've got work to do. I'm going to clear up this mess here. I've got to. And Mexico isn't a pleasant place for lone gringos."

"We shan't be alone. Ever hear of El Latigazo?"

Brennan started. "El Latigazo! That's one of Villa's ex-lieutenants with a fancy name. 'The Lash'! What's he doing?"

"I don't know what he's doing," Groman said calmly. "He might be the mysterious rustler about here, though looking at a geography makes one doubtful. He could hardly raid so frequently and get across the border each time without a trace."

Brennan shook his head. "Not unless he has a hole up somewhere about here."

"He hasn't," Groman said. "He wouldn't even come across to meet me. I'm to join him in a tiny town called La Victoria, just across the way."

"If it isn't rustling, then what's the game?" Brennan demanded.

"I don't know," Groman smiled. "It'll be better than dangling at the end of a rope, though—which is what's due for both of us here. And you may get a line on what all this mystery's about."

"Not if they know who I am."

"Look here!" Groman was suddenly in earnest. "I've got no scruples—about

anything. If I chuck in with El Latigazo, I stay put. If you find he's an enemy, I automatically become your enemy—as soon as you menace me. But until I am personally in danger, I'll give you my word of honor that I'll stand with you, and that El Latigazo will never learn who you are. He needs fast gunfighters, and I've heard of you. I'd like to feel those two .45s of yours were alongside me, too. That's the proposition. Care to take it?"

Brennan frowned. Lifeless eyes swept the endless waste of desert, recalled like a mirror the scenes of the hot, unending day just passed. Hunted! No, he had to cross the line; he had to gather breath for the work ahead of him. Perhaps across there he would find a clue, for it was certain that the stolen cattle had crossed the line. He did not know yet what Latigazo might be engaged in; so he could make no definite choice now. For the present Groman's plans coincided with his own.

"I'll cross with you," he said briefly. "And while we're being frank, my sentiments are about the same as yours, I reckon." He thought of Joan.

Groman must have had the same thought, for he looked up with mocking smile. "I gathered they would be," he said. "I had almost forgotten that morning—"

Brennan's eyes were cold. "It might be better if we did forget that morning," he said. "Both of us."

Groman looked at him. He started to smile and then the smile died. He said nothing. But the mocking light fled his eyes. They started shortly afterward for the arroyo.

Side by side, their mounts picketed a little distance away, they had been lying there for an hour, while the moon waned slowly, when from the desert trail they heard the creak of saddle leather and the soft footfalls of a cow pony, before the shifting, betraying light revealed Moore coming alone.

BRENNAN'S hand left his gun. He did not go out. He waited until the deputy entered the concealing shadows of the depression. Then he called softly.

"All right, Lou. I've got someone with me. Come on."

Moore came to a halt and slipped from the saddle with a long sigh. He mopped his face and acknowledged by a nod Brennan's introduction of Groman.

"Did Jim find the money?" Brennan demanded.

"Yeh." But Moore made no move to deliver it. "I've got it. Gosh, they shore are after yuh hot, Brad. Mulrew an' Lanyski ain't let up for a minute; but now that Ramsey's back I ain't so put to it."

"What does Ramsey think?"

"Took my word for it. Admits there's funny work somewhere. He's a white man, all right. That's why I'm free right now."

"Free? What do you mean?"

"Free t' come with yuh. I still got my star, but Ramsey said I could light out. I'm on the trail o' rustlers, and I've got a hunch that if I foller you I might see what I'm lookin' for. Hell, Brad, I always did hate mysteries, and I ain't gonna be able to take my job with the ease I'm entitled to, till this thing's cleaned up."

Brennan swore. He was not misled by Moore's careless words. This man was his friend, going with him into exile in the hope that he might aid him.

"But, good Lord, Lou, do you realize where we're going? We're heading to join a bad hombre calling himself El Latigazo, across the line!"

"Heard of him," agreed Moore calmly. "But he ain't the rustler. I figgered that all out. He couldn't make raids like these."

"We don't know what he's doing," Brennan protested. "But it'll be a dangerous play, Lou."

"Hell, let's get goin'." Lou got wearily to his feet. "Here's yore dinero. I think we can slip across about now an' be reasonably safe."

CHAPTER X

"Is Somebody Gettin' Yeller?"

BY the daybreak which came three hours afterward, the border was left behind; and late that morning, the three silent riders came to a watering place where wearied horses and men were forced to call a halt.

"La Victoria is over westward o' here," Moore said. "We can make it by night. Right now, I'm sleepin'."

The heat was terrific. From the wide expanse of shimmering sand, billowing in dunes and drifts, head-devils danced upward joyously. Here and there a lone cactus stuck imploring arms out toward a pitiless sky; the horizon was one with the heat waves and the white sky.

They ate sparingly. Starved though they were, the heat was too terrific to make the dry food taste well. With no conversation, the three rolled into the palm shade and slept.

It was Brennan who awakened first, oppressed by the idea that he was being stared at. He first saw a pistol muzzle, the weapon resting comfortably across a blue clad elbow. Behind the muzzle was a brutal, heavily bearded face with cruel, sardonic lips, and a pair of cruel eyes. Beside this one man, sitting his horse, two Mexicans had dismounted and held rifles carelessly.

Brennan sat up. "Stay where yuh are, pardner." The pistol moved. "Don't go reachin' for those guns—yuh won't never get to 'em."

The Mexicans—villainous looking enough, but mild in comparison with the huge bulk and animal ferocity of their leader—drew back as simultaneously Moore and Groman stirred at the voice. Both remained frozen, half rising from the ground. But neither made a move.

The stubble bearded one grinned. "Just ran across yuh, but I hated to wake yuh. Maybe yuh'll tell me what yo're doin' hereabouts."

Groman sat up thoughtfully. "Yes, maybe we will," he agreed coolly. "The chances are—we won't. Who are you?"

"I'm back o' this gun, an' that says I don't have t' answer questions. I'm repeatin' mine."

Groman got coolly to his feet and strolled over toward the big man. "I don't know who you are, nor what you want; but if I'm guessing right, you're in for trouble unless you stop this tin soldier business. I'm looking for El Latigazo!"

At the name, the evil looking Mexican crowded forward with guns cautiously raised, and the eyes behind the revolver flickered in momentary surprise. Then a mirthless grin came over the man's cruel features.

"So, yuh know names an' everything. Well, pardner, yuh may be right or wrong, but that's where yo're goin' right now. El Latigazo ain't expectin' visitors."

"He's expecting me. If you know anything about his business, you know it!" Groman challenged coolly.

Brennan saw the man glance at the Mexicans as though speculation on the effects of these words. His eyes were red pointed in their depths, and his thick brows drew down.

"I know as much about his business as I want to," he growled. "He's expectin'—one man."

"I'm the man." Groman waded care-

lessly toward the others. "These are friends."

The gunman looked suspicious. "What're yuh usin' for a name?" he demanded.

"None for you! I don't like your manners. Take me to the boss," Groman went on quickly, "or you're going to be sorry you ever found this watering place!"

For a moment Brennan held his breath. Moore remained tense, poised. They knew this was not a bluff. Groman could not help act his part. He had no more fear than if he was bullet-proof, and his own life mattered to him nothing at all.

The other man's figure seemed to tighten. His trigger finger trembled. His eyes were narrow and burning. For a long moment he remained silent. Then his eyes swept his three captives.

"Pardners, yo're sure goin' to like it at our camp," he said. "Consider me like a welcomin' committee. I'm Jones, and the handle stays. After yo're acquainted—" and his eyes dwelt evilly on Groman now—"we're goin' to get together frequentlike. I ain't t' let yuh know a lot about me."

HE signalled to his companions. The horses were already bridled. The three were stripped of their weapons and bidden to mount. They started, the man calling himself Jones bringing up the rear in a glowering silence. Brennan knew they had made their first enemy; but Groman seemed utterly oblivious to it.

La Victoria was a sleepy collection of shacks that only irony could have named a town. There was no post office. Bony curs infested the single street on which there was a lone general store, a bar, and a board front labelled hotel—the hotel label almost lost under a mass of placards and announcements. Mildly curious inhabitants, scantily clothed, watched the six men ride into the street toward sundown, and silently proceed toward the cantina.

Here there were more men. Most of them were Mexicans. All were heavily armed, with knives as well as pistols, and there was a sullen suspicious air over everything. Jones halted in the entrance.

"Esta el jefe aqui?"

Brennan's eyes were on the nearby hitching rack while Jones conversed with those inside the barroom. Slowly his eyelids narrowed. Moore was sitting his saddle beside him, and Brennan reached out casually to touch his hand. The deputy's gaze followed his.

There at the rack was a black thoroughbred, lean of shank, slim of leg, bearing an ornately carved Mexican saddle studded with silver, holding a gayly colored holster for both rifle and pistol at either side. On the animal's rump was a neat Comet, the brand mark of Harry Holt's Comet string—he branded the breeders, of course, though never the young stock.

Moore inclined his head slowly. "We stay?"

"Sit tight. We've hit the right place and we're not leaving till we know the answer."

Groman swore at the delay in the barroom. "I gather your boss isn't here yet," he told Jones. "I'm going in and have a drink. Anyone joining me?"

Jones stared, then smiled grudging approval. The others swung from their saddles and entered the saloon. At the bar the curious, hard-eyed loungers made way for the newcomers and scrutinized them carefully.

It was a hard looking lot, Mexicans and Americans alike. Jones chuckled to one of his countrymen at his elbow. "The new hombre's buyin', boys. Looks like the boss is tryin' to raise an army again."

Someone swore gruffly. "We need an

army, these days. But it ain't gonna do no harm to make sure who it is wants t' join it."

There was a growl and a shifting of feet in assent. Groman tossed off a drink calmly and Brennan turned, suddenly aware of a silence which fell upon the barroom. Jones turned. His smile was menacing, and his eyes were not pleasant. The others turned by common consent toward the door, where a slim, fastidious young Mexican, gaudy in embroidered *vestido,* silver spurs, slashed, wide trousers, and stiff-brimmed sombrero, leaned carelessly surveying the gathering.

"Here's the boss!" Jones snarled. "Maybe yuh know him. *Somatia,* is somebody gettin' yeller around here, that we have t' recruit a young army?"

The Mexican's handsome, delicate eyebrows rose and slowly he straightened up. His eyes flashed over the newcomers. He droppd his cigarette.

"I do not expect these men," he said softly; and in that instant Brennan knew that his life was worth very little indeed.

CHAPTER XI

"Two Guns Mean Business!"

GROMAN moved forward, unimpressed by the tense silence. the hands that hovered over pistol butts, the instinctive indrawing motion of the crowd that surrounded him.

"You expected me, El Latigazo," he said. "I had word from you at Carlton Center." He hesitated, then added, "In Cavalo's cantina."

"Ah!" El Latigazo nodded slowly. "You are—Groman, let us say? But these others?"

Groman smiled. "They were going the same way and there was a posse at their heels. You can take them or leave 'em, but they've got nothing to do."

It was his carelessness which won. That, and the look of the two men left against the bar. Brennan's cold face and colder eyes, his powerful physique, and his silent, immoble demeanor, spoke volumes. Lou Moore, smaller, more wiry, beside him, looked like half of a dangerous combination.

"We ask not many questions here," El Latigazo said. "What names have you—chose?"

Brennan did not smile. He jerked his head at Moore. "His name's Jones," he announced boldly. "And mine is—Jones!"

He heard a little gasp of anger, and the first Jones jerked up his eyes glowering. Some one laughed. Then El Latigazo joined the laugh, softly.

"Bueno!" he exclaimed. "Hold up, Jones, eh? I have understan' that the name is a frequent one in the Estados. It mus' be, for all who come here, have it. We have had many baptisms, to prevent confusion, Senores. If you will be interested to join us, merely for convenience we would give you new names."

Brennan nodded without a smile. "I suppose we all understand one another," he said. "Jones and I have need work, but we're looking for money, too."

"If you will—work—there is dinero," the *jefe* promised. His suave manner altered; he was, suddenly, Brennan realized, a lot like the lash he had taken for a name. "If you do not work—if you fail—we have no use for you here; *sabe?* There is enough work an' money for all, but all mus' do his share. Those who fail, we do not like to have go away from here wit' what they know. That never happens. I am sure you understand, Mes-taire—Jones."

Brennan nodded. *"Comprendo,"* he

said shortly. "Do we get our guns back?"

Jones — the first Jones — snarled. "Ain't we got enough hands diggin' into what we make now, Somatia? And how in hell d' we know who these hombres are? I got a hunch—"

"You will keep your ideas, *amigo,*" interrupted El Latigazo softly, sibilantly. "These gentlemen cannot think of treachery; they would not be so mad. They would die too horribly, as they know. Treachery, *amigo mio,*" he went on, with a pointed threat in the voice the held the big man still, "is some-t'ing to be avoided with El Latigazo. Remember that!"

He turned away carelessly, nodding first at Groman and then, mockingly, at Brennan. "There is room for you at our camp," he said. "Your excellent namesake will show you." He went out.

Groman smiled. "Charming place here. Home-loving crowd and all that. About the only thing that's not a signal for guns is an offer to buy a drink. And tonight I shall feel peaceful." He started back to the bar.

Brennan strapped on his gun-belt with a feeling of relief. He saw the American, Jones, watching him with thoughtful, unfriendly eyes. The man managed to range beside him at the bar.

"Two guns mean business, pardner," he drawled. "In these parts a man's got t' be ready to prove he can hold up their weight."

Brennan met the red gimlet eyes coolly. "I've known that for some time," he agreed, "and I'm still wearin' 'em."

Jones hesitated; Brennan's cold gaze never wavered. There was something deadly in his expressionless face, his habitual disinclination to talk.

"Yeh," Jones surprised him. "Reckon yuh ought to know this part o' the country. I've seen yuh somewhere hereabouts—recent!"

Moore let his fingers hook into his gunbelt. Groman appeared not to hear. Brennan was turning round and round his whisky glass, making concentric circles on the sloppy bar top. He knew what Jones' words meant; he knew that recognition would spell instant death.

IN some way, this band of El Latigazo's was connected with the rustling that had been going on across the line. There was still a mystery to it, but Holt's brand outside was betrayal hard to be denied. And once these men connected Brennan with the Square D, he was lost. He and Moore both. Speed with a gun would not count against their numbers. Sheer fear would send them upon him to blot him and what knowledge he had gained, from the earth.

But no sign of this reasoning appeared on his face. He met the gunman's gaze squarely.

"Jones get to a lot o' places," he said. "Maybe we're in the same family, *amigo.*"

There was a sharp laugh that spread along the listeners at the bar. Names, as Latigazo had suggested, did not mean a great deal here. Jones seemed not too popular in his bullying, heavy handed fashion.

He nodded and downed his drink. Then he turned away. "Any time you hombres want to know where yuh bunk," he said, "I'm ready to hit the camp."

CHAPTER XII

"An' Here's to Settle It!"

GROMAN came into the little tent where Brenan was bent over the task of cleaning out his revolver barrels, and this time he halted gravely. Lou Moore lay

sprawled on a bunk, dozing off the heat filled hours of the afternoon. They had been in the camp of El Latigazo for a week, but had learned almost nothing.

Brennan looked up and saw that Groman had learned something unpleasant. The ex-cavalryman dropped down on the cot beside him. Finally he said. "Jones knows your name."

Brennan started. Groman took a cigarette, and in a moment continued: "I've just come from La Victoria—that cantina. He was pretty drunk. Raving about El Latigazo and his methods. Spoke of crossing the line and rustling; then he stopped short. I heard him curse, and he said, 'By God—Square D!' But he didn't say any more. Asked, a minute later where Somatia was, and I slipped out."

Brennan considered. "He dislikes all of us," he said at last. "Aims at Latigazo's job, too. Once he lets out what he knows—"

His eyes narrowed. They met Groman's even stare and Groman nodded.

"Somatia is not by his shack," he said softly. "Jones'll reach there any minute."

Brennan inclined his head abruptly. He gave a rag a final jerk and pulled it through the barrel of his .45. Then, breaking open the cylinder, he slipped in his cartridges methodically. Standing up, he twirled the barrels, slipped the two guns in and out of their sheaths with movements that lighted a spark of admiration in Groman's eyes.

"If Lou wakes up," said Brennan calmly, "tell him where to find me."

"Shall I go along?"

"No. This is a lone job. It mustn't look like a party. I'll be back in a minute."

Brennan faced the burning sunlight of mid-afternoon like a man who has a disagreeable task to complete as soon as possible. There was a methodical coldness in his manner as he rounded a cabin standing before their tent and started across a sort of open, sandy square upon which the hastily put up shacks faced.

There had been nothing startling about the camp of Somatia, who called himself El Latigazo. It was in reality not a camp. At the edge of La Victoria, some road builders of a former administration had once thrown up some tin roofed board shacks. One was a cook-house, used as a general dining hall for Somatia's meager following; and three or four more were simply barren, one room affairs.

Behind the grayish collection the bulk of the foothills arose crimson or gray, according to the slant of the sunlight, and the canyon which opened on the American side might have been continued to here; for Brennan had discovered what certainly looked like an entrance. But it seemed to lead nowhere.

The camp was quiet. It had been thus for the past week. Quarrels had been rife, the men snarling and cursing. Idleness never improved matters in a place like this.

But as he rounded the mess shack, Brennan caught an instant gimpse of a group of five or six men near Somatia's quarters. He saw the slim figure of the outlaw chief, and the burly shoulders of Jones. There was something catlike about his tread as he crossed the square.

He halted, close by and unnoticed, as he caught Jones' thick voice.

"No jobs; nothin' but layin' around. No dinero! An' we take on three more Americanos that we don't know too much about. El Latigazo, I'm callin' a showdown!"

Brennan's eyes narrowed. He heard a low, uncertain growl from the listeners gathered about the two men. Somatia was like a taut wire, his dark eyes menacing, wary. Brennan realized that he and his identity were but a part

of all this scene; that Jones was using him as the ladder by which he intended to dethrone El Latigazo and assume command of the band.

"A showdown," Somatia purred. "An' just when—an' how—will you have it, *amigo?*" His talon fingers were poised at his waist.

Jones hesitated. "Right soon, *jefe!*" he growled. "Pronto. Do you know who these new hombres are?"

"I am satisfied."

"Well, I'm not. Not satisfied with them or with the way things are bein' run around here!"

HE broke off. Brennan had waited as long as it was feasible. Now he stepped forward lightly; his eyes only for Jones. His right elbow pushed a man from his path; and he was suddenly facing the bully across a cleared space.

"I reckon it's me you don't like, Jones!" his voice cut in harshly. "Here's yore chance to settled it—pronto, like you said!"

There was a quick breath. Men moved sidewise. Somatia's deep eyes burned as he crouched. Jones whirled, and as he met Brennan's blank eyes, his own took sudden flame. For a moment rage mastered him, and his first purpose was forgotten.

"Yo're dead right, damn yor soul!" he cursed. "An' here's to settle it!"

Brennan was smiling—a cold, deadly smile. As Jones spoke, he was watching the gunman's hands fall down to his belt. The big, wooden grip pistols sprang from their sheaths. There was a roar of flame—red jets burned in streaks through the gray of powder smoke. Four shots!

The smoke blew past Brennan's face; and his smile had not altered. They had not seen his hands. It was as if the pistols had leapt forward and he had caught them slightly above his waist, in midair. Jones was swaying. Weakened fingers loosed their grip on his guns. They fell.

His knees crumpled. There was silence. The smoke before him eddied away as his big frame plunged through it and he struck the ground on his face, unmoving.

Brennan's guns circled. "I reckon you all saw that," he said calmly. "Anybody question that I was right?"

Somatia was watching him with an odd smile. "You were entirely right," he said. "He went for his guns first."

The others nodded, some reluctantly. But that the shooting had been fair enough all agreed. El Latigazo stirred the dead figure with a contemptuous foot.

"He talked like a child," he said. "He died like a child, wit' pop-guns that he thought he could use. As for you—" his eyes swept the circle of men—"you will have work an' money, within two or three days. Work an' money an' plenty of danger, since you like it so well."

Brennan sheathed his guns and stood looking at a hole in his chaps which was beginning to look damp. Somatia saw it.

"We will look at it in my house," he said. "Come wit' me, Senor—" he smiled—"you may be Jones now, since you have removed the—obstacles!"

The others watched them move off. Brennan limped a little. One of Jones' bullets, he found, had gone through the flesh of his calf and it was bleeding considerably. But it was a clean wound; he sterilized and bandaged it without trouble. Somatia sat watching him, smoking one of his inevitable, long brown *cigarrillos*.

CHAPTER XIII

"She Is Beautiful, This Lady"

SOMATIA tossed away his cigarette and lighted another. Brennan sat up. The leader still had his eyes on him.

"It is probable that you saved my life today," he said. "Jones was ready to kill me; an' I am not too good with the draw."

Brennan nodded. "He was no friend of mine," he replied coolly.

"No?"

Brennan did not meet El Latigazo's eyes as that long drawl came out meaningly. Did the leader guess? One could tell little from his expression.

"Jones was a kind of *segundo*—a lieutenant to me," he continued after a moment. "Only, he had too much ambition. You have said little of yourself, Senor—Jones. Do you intend to stay with us?"

Brennan looked up. "If it pays," he retorted.

"It will pay. You may be valuable. You will stay here—wit' me."

"I didn't know there was any other place to stay," returned Brennan slightly puzzled.

"There is. In a night or two, you will see. Groman will go on. He will stay—in the canyon."

Brennan was glad of his expressionless features then. So there was something in the canyon! Something that connected that mysterious place with El Latigazo. He wanted desperately to ask for more information.

"I suppose you'll tell me what you're talking about when you're ready," he remarked dryly.

"Exactly. Groman is needed elsewhere. You an' your friend will stay here—wit' me. Jones—the first Jones—could shoot an' fight, but he was a child. You have brains. It is not good to think too much; but if you will think when it is necessary, we should continue very well."

Brennan nodded. At that instant a horse drew up outside, and a sweaty Mexican swung down before the open door of the shack. El Latigazo's eyes lighted.

"It is he whom I expect," he said as he got to his feet.

"Shall I go?"

"No, stay. You would learn soon, anyway."

The man came in. "What is the word?" Somatia demanded eagerly.

"All will be ready in two nights," said the man in Spanish. "Senor Mulrew's men will meet us in the gulch."

"Cattle?" Somatia fortunately did not look at Brennan when Mulrew's name came. He seemed so interested that he appeared scarcely to notice its mention.

"Not now. The—" the Mexican hesitated, glanced at Brennan, and then added—"the other."

"*Bueno!* Is there any other news?"

The man laughed. "*Si! El Jefe* Mulrew becomes young. There is a lady, *hermosa*—beautiful! The lady of the Double N. Senor Mulrew becomes a child."

"The Double N! He has humor!"

Brennan's face froze. Through him went a pain and an agony that in its very repression brought beads of sweat to his forehead. He wanted to cry out, to leap up with both his guns blazing, to curse! Yet he sat there while El Latigazo, laughing, flicked the ash from his cigarette and turned to him.

"You understand, Senor Jones? She is beautiful, this lady. I have seen her. An' what our chief wants, he gets! Always!"

Brennan shook his head. He had recovered by now. "I have heard of them both," he said, and got up.

"There will be a messenger at sundown of the day after tomorrow," said the rider on departing. "The—shipment will come up here before then. The messenger will tell you that all is well."

Alone with Somatia again, Brennan started toward the door. The chief halted him.

"You have heard things, Senor Jones. I have trust' you a little. Be wise an' remember that the greatest knowledge is to him who keeps it."

BRENNAN went out, directly to the tent he and Moore occupied with Groman. The latter, immediately he had heard the results of the shooting, had joined in a game of three-card monte in one of the shacks. Moore was alone. When Brennan came in he threw himself on to his cot and swore.

"Get news?" the deputy asked. "Heard yuh got honored special and taken to the big tepee."

"News — plenty!" Brennan exclaimed. "I don't know what it all means, but this gang's working with Mulrew, all right. We're taking some kind of 'shipment' into the canyon night after tomorrow, and meeting his men; I got that."

Moore whistled. "So it's Mulrew! And there's a way through the canyon! But what kind of a shipment?"

"That's what I didn't learn. It's got me, Lou. What'd they be sending into the States from here? And what has it got to do with the rustling? They're not rustlin cows *into* the States!"

"Mulrew don't need to rustle cows—I've said that to myself till I'm tired, Brad. And the amount o' cows rustled from our territory—even if they'd a' got the herd you found cut out in the upper valley by the spring—those cows ain't enough to keep an organization like this and make it pay for Mulrew besides! What I'm interested in is the way through the canyon. I couldn't find any."

"Nor I. We'll find it now, though."

"It'll be all we need, I'm thinkin'. Once we know what's up—and we'll learn that when we move—and have the way through the canyon, we can ride back t' Bociera and square up accounts."

But Brennan still looked gloomy. "There's more," he managed to say, at last.

"More? Groman, you mean? Yeh, we'll have to have a showdown with him. Maybe his crime ain't so bad but what, if he threw in with us and turned State's evidence—"

"He won't. He's not that kind. But I'm not thinking of Groman. The Mex that brought the news said Mulrew was getting young again on account of a girl —*the lady of the Double N!*"

Moore swore. And then both men sat in utter, blank silence. This near they had come to a solution of the mystery. And yet, at this point they found themselves unable to penetrate further. There was nothing to be said; and, for the present, nothing to be done.

CHAPTER XIV

"THAT THROWS ANOTHER JOKER IN THE DECK!"

JOAN WALTERS could not be eager about the forthcoming interview. She had met Mulrew twice before; the last time had been on the occasion of her first appearance in town after her uncle's death and Brad Brennan's escape.

She had gone to see Sheriff Ramsey and had found Arlen Mulrew there—a big, powerful man of handsome physique, but with bushy reddish yellow eyebrows that met over the bridge of his

nose, and bush hair of the same color. There was a scar along the side of his heavy nose that seemed to crush in the bones at that side of his face.

With heavy cordiality he expressed his sorrow at her uncle's death. But Joan and her uncle had never been close, and she disliked hypocritical displays of grief. She had been shocked and saddened at the catastrophe; but something about the owner of the canyon mines repelled her.

"I came to ask about Brad Brennan," she told the sheriff. "Has he been found guilty?"

"I've got a warrant for him," said the grave faced Ramsey when she halted. "He broke jail, and there's a lot of circumstantial evidence against him. On top of it, he's run off. He'll have to stand trial."

"And there won't be much doubt about what the trial'll say," Mulrew added grimly.

"You think he's guilty, then?" Joan asked coldly.

"Everybody does. Are you an exception?" laughed Mulrew.

"Perhaps. I can't seem to condemn anyone in advance."

"We were just talking about you," Mulrew hastened to interpose. "That ranch o' yourn is going to be a big proposition for a lone girl. I was figurin' I'd make you an offer on it if you're interested."

She shook her head. "Thank you, I haven't considered selling yet." The chill in her voice prohibited further discussion.

"Maybe when things quiet down," Ramsey put in gently.

"They've been quiet," Mulrew grunted, "every since Brennan's skipped." He got up. "Anyhow, Miss Walters, I hope you'll remember I'm sort of a neighbor. Any time I can help in anyway, let me know, eh?" His colorless eyes roved over the trim slenderness of her figure; they rested with a speculative eagerness on her face—a dissembling look in them that made her wonder what lay behind them.

Stubby had absented himself for two days. Now he confronted his mistress.

"Ma'am," he said nervously, slapping a battered sombrero against his chaps. "I been over everything, an' I'm plumb sure Brad Brennan had nothin' to do with that rustlin'!"

The eagerness with which she raised her head, the light of hope sparkling in her eyes, betrayed her casual words. "Is that so, Stubby? Are you sure?"

"It just can't be so," Stubby averred. "That creek where we found the steers twice, movin'—if Brennan'd had them, he'd have to go all around the Comet an' across the strip o' desert before he could reach the border with 'em. Unless he could go through the canyon, an' there *ain't* no way through the canyon. The creek leads into the playa an' just drops in the ground."

"But how about a hiding place?" Joan demanded. "He couldn't do it all in one night, anyway."

"That's it. There's no hidin' place but what'd be in sight of the Comet or the road in the daytime. Unless," said Stubby again, "it's the canyon. An' Mulrew sure ain't joining any game with Brad Brennan!"

"Hardly." Joan considered. "But if there is only the canyon trail. Stubby, don't try to tell me Mr. Mulrew was rustling."

"I'm not. Why should he? Yes—" Stubby scratched his head helplessly, "I'm only sure it wasn't Brad."

"Do you think," asked Joan slowly, "that if we could convince Mr. Mulrew of all this, he could help us?"

"He's the only one who can; but he's been so busy houndin' Brennan he hasn't thought of nothin' else," said Stubby. "Anyway, he ain't crooked, don't need to be!"

HE rode out into the canyon some time later and carried the message from his employer, asking if Mr. Mulrew would be kind enough to visit the Double N.

Mr. Mulrew would, with singular pleasure. When he got back, Stubby scratched his head and sat down beside Sam Lagen, who was mending slowly.

"Yuh know, Sam, I never figgered it before till I got out there. Who in hell's workin' that mine of Mulrew's? Ever see any of his employes in town?"

"Gosh, no!" Lagen sat up. "Only Lanyski and a couple o' hands like that. They ain't diggin' the mines. Remember, the thing wasn't worked for fifteen years before he took it over, just on account o' labor."

Stubby rolled a cigarette. "Maybe we can find out tonight," he grunted. "I ain't much on headwork, Sam. I sure wish we had Brennan here—an' him free, to investigate. I gotta hunch that this mine business may be somethin' to start on."

Lagen shook his head. "Not so much, Stubby. The gold's straight enough—lots of it, all stamped and in bars and assayed proper. But who's diggin' it? It might be Indians, and they'd have to live in the mountains—or else get out through the other end of the canyon—if there is another end!"

"If there is," mused Stubby, "that just throws another joker in the deck." He sighed. "Oh, well, I took on two new hands today. I need rest, an' puzzles always wear me plumb out."

CHAPTER XV

"IT'S A MAN'S JOB!"

MULREW had made his appearance shortly after dusk, but when he learned the nature of the discussion to which he had been summoned, he seemed chagrined. Chagrined, too, that Sam Lagen and Stubby stayed very much in evidence in the big living room where Joan received him.

"Them cattle didn't go through my trail," he said flatly. "Why, my house squats square across it, an' the mines are beyond."

"An' I suppose if they got past the house, the men in the mines 'd be in the way, huh?" Stubby murmured.

Mulrew shot him a sharp look. "Of course. And—"

"Who's workin' them mines, come to think of it?" drawled Stubby, without looking at their guest. "Gosh, Mulrew, they must be ghosts. Must take a sight o' men to keep on turnin' out that ore."

Mulrew laughed uncomfortably. Joan frowned.

"It does," he agreed. "We get all kinds. Most of them from below the line—they drift in lookin' for work. We've got good quarters for 'em, so they stay pretty close till they've saved a little, and then drift out." He turned quickly to Joan. "I don't know why you refuse to believe Brennan's guilty," he said. "Personally, it doesn't matter; he's away now, and if he ever comes back, he's cooked."

Joan flushed. "I'd like to get at the truth; that's all," she said. "Brad Brennan's condemned in advance, and mostly on account of losses we've suffered."

Mulrew laughed in what was meant to be a good-humored way. "Sentiment!" he said. "Ladies on the range. Miss Walters, you better let me take over this property. I'll run it for yuh, if y' like. But it's a man's job."

Joan shook her head and was about to reply when hoofbeats were heard and a horse slid to a stop before the veranda steps. Everyone looked up. Stubby got to his feet. At the sight of a cowboy outside the screen door, he looked relieved.

"Come on in, Resak." Turning to

Lagen, he explained. "One o' the new boys I just took on. What's up now?"

The young puncher seemed embarrassed at facing so many people unexpectedly. "Maybe I shouldn't 'a' come," he said. "I'm not onto the job yet; but you didn't tell me yuh had cows ready for a drive up at the Fork end o' the valley, an' I found about fifty of 'em bunched in a draw there. I—I just thought—"

Stubby leaned across the table. "Double N cows up there—fifty?" he spat out. "How long since yuh seen 'em, Resak?"

There was a dead silence in the room. Stubby's quick reaction had told all of them enough. Joan leaned forward and Mulrew's eyes were upon her face. Sam Lagen shot the mine owner a quick look and his eyes narrowed. He clutched painfully at his wounded shoulder and tried to move the healing leg, wound in bandages.

"I come straight from the draw," Resak was saying. "Must 'a' taken me about 'n hour and a half across the sand there. I started about as it was getting dark; just happened to run into 'em and looked the brand over out o' curiosity."

Stubby swung on his employer. "Bunched for a drive is right!" he cried. "Them cows wasn't there yesterday, 'cause I rode through there. They've been cut out and they'll be run off tonight!"

Joan sprang to her feet, her eyes blazing. "Come on, Stubby!" she exclaimed. "This time we may get there in time to find out things. Saddle my horse!"

Mulrew sprang up, but Stubby cut him off. "Not you, Miss Joan! *You* can't ride out on this!"

"It's insane!" Mulrew exploded. "Look here, Miss Walters. You stay and I'll ride along with Stubby. That'll make three of us, and—"

Lagen said nothing. Lying back in his comfortable chair, his eyes flickered from his employer's face to Mulrew's.

"I'm going," said Joan. There was decision in her voice. "I'm going with Stubby and Resak, Mr. Mulrew. If you think you can help, I'd be glad to have you come along."

Stubby groaned. "It's no use, Resak," he said, turning. "Saddle them hosses, I'll get a couple o' rifles."

Sam Lagen had not moved when they all went out a few minutes later. He listened intently to the departing hoofbeats of the four mounts and his black brows were drawn down in deep thought. He commenced inspecting his bandages.

The moon had not yet risen. Unspeaking, the four pressed across the rolling lands toward the strip of desert which cut off the direct line toward the draw to which Resak was leading the way. Joan found Mulrew riding slightly to her rear and alongside.

"I wish you'd let me take you back, Miss Walters," she heard him say. "This isn't a woman's work."

SHE did not reply. Her lips were set; and under a soft colored sombrero her eyes were keen and determined. She carried a small silver mounted and pearl handled .38, the gift of her uncle, and there was an ornamented belt of cartridges at her waist.

Stubby and Resak rode ahead, unspeaking. They crossed the treacherous sand which caught at the hoofs of the straining mounts, and plunged into an arroyo. The shadows of the mountains loomed far southward, the foothills converging upon one another. A few bleak stars stood out in the purple sky.

The two cowmen held Winchesters across their saddles, and their holsters hung low. They rode straight up, effortless, until Resak put up a warning hand.

They halted. Ahead, in the bulking darkness, there was movement. Stubby knew the draw to be not far. They could hear cattle. Stubby swore. Leather cracked.

"They're movin' through the draw!" Stubby cried. "This time we got 'em. Come on!" He dug in his spurs.

"Miss Walters!" began Mulrew; but she was already at Stubby's heels; she heard Mulrew getting off to a tardy start behind her.

Through mesquite and sage they pounded to the crest of a low ridge. Dust was seeping up gray through the sparse trees and thorny cactus. The sound of hundreds of moving hoofs at a gallop grew into a tumult. Stubby crested the ridge and uttered a Sioux whoop.

Then suddenly the tumult became chaos. Joan was conscious of pistol shots, cries of warning. She drew her gun just as Stubby brought up his rifle and fired. She saw the red flame from his weapon stab the dark; heard Resak curse and saw him slide sidewise.

Then a yell of warning!

"Lanyski!"

Whirling in tense surprise, she saw Mulrew's gun bark again and knew suddenly that it had been he who brought Resak down. Again it flamed. Stubby's gun flew from his hands and he slid backward. His horse leapt, and Stubby dropped to the ground.

Like a flash, comprehension came. Joan saw two men emerging from the draw and bearing down upon her. She brought up the .38 and suddenly found her wrists caught. Iron arms clasped her hands together and held the muzzle pointed to the sky. In her ear she heard Mulrew's voice. "Take that popgun out of her hand, Lanyski."

"What?"

She felt the gun twisted free and heard Mulrew's laugh. "Almost—she mixed up the party. Wouldn't stay at home." He released her hands, but caught her bridle. "Well, yuh can't go back to the Double N now. Reckon yo're going to spend a little vacation in the canyon an' learn to take advice!"

Joan was conscious of his shining, avid eyes; of the grinning, stubble bearded faces that loomed out of the dark; their vicious, cruel laughter.

"She knows too much now; she's gotta come," grinned the man called Lanyski. "Well, chief, yuh didn't think yore courtship was gonna end like this!"

There was a chuckle. "Take care of her," Mulrew ordered. "One o' you boys go back an' finish off Sam Lagen. If he starts talkin' they'll commence to wonder. I don't think that Chink cook knew I was on the ranch, but if he gets in the way, make it a clean-out. Let's get goin'."

CHAPTER XVI

"We're Ready!"

JONES' death and the news that ran swiftly through El Latigazo's camp, put an end to the restlessness that had characterized the outlaws during the past days. It also isolated the three newcomers, with the exception of Groman, who grew more silent and uncommunicative and who gambled incessantly, either at the cantina in La Victoria or at the camp.

Most of the money from the previous operations of the band had been gambled and drunk away. When the news came, the last of it disappeared. On that last day, when Somatia awaited only Mulrew's messenger with final orders, there was a tense quiet.

Brennan had remained in his tent. He did not want to seem curious. Though El Latigazo had accepted him,

he was fully aware that he and Moore were still under suspicion.

Before a little window cut in to the mess shack wall and used as a sort of commissary window for the sale of tobacco, whisky, and other things, two Chinamen had halted. Brennan saw the cook's head emerge; he talked with one of the Mexicans who had come up with the nervous looking, uncertain yellow men.

There was no one else in sight. The camp was quiet. Brennan, watching the scene at the cook shack and studying the Orientals thoughtfully, scarcely heard Moore as the deputy, fumbling with tobacco papers, slipped about a corner of the tent and sat down on a stump. He followed his companion's eyes and nodded.

"Yeh, I been watchin' 'em, too. They's always been Chinks in this camp, Brad; but they always is along this part o' the border. Today, though, I saw several in town—an' they ain't been more than one here before."

Brennan met his eyes. "I was wondering," he murmured. "Do you suppose—?" He jerked to his feet. "Hell, that's one solution! That 'shipment'—it's something going through the canyon from this side. Why not Chinks?"

"Yeh," Lou Moore considered. "But where do they come out, an' what happens when they're through, if that *is* the game? I been figurin' on that, too."

"That remains for later," said Brennan. "I'm sure, the more I think of it, that we're smuggling Chinks through."

"An' how about the cattle?"

Brennan brought up scowling. Every new clue they got seemed to render the situation as a whole the more baffling. What had Chink smuggling—a very profitable business, as he knew—to do with Mulrew, who owned a valuable mine, and what had it to do with the widespread cattle raiding across the line?

They saw Groman dismounting from a horse, which he left outside the small corral, and come walking toward them. Since taking up his place with El Latigazo, Groman had evidently borrowed money. He had become more of a dandy than ever; his soft boots shone incongruously in this setting, his dark, silken shirts, his tailored breeches, and his new gray sombrero reflected an extravagant taste allowed full rein.

He halted before Brennan, smiling. "There's some news in. We go tonight, anyway. I'm leaving you. Have you made up your mind yet—about your plans?"

Brennan met his gaze evenly. "I'd like to know yours first," he suggested. "Oh, I know you're going on to Mulrew. But I expect to find out things. Are you going to betray us?"

"That depends. As I told you, I'm not going to let you do anything that'll harm me."

"Naturally. And I have nothing against either Mulrew or Somatia unless I find that their activities are responsible for my hard luck. But it looks as though I'll find out just that. What then?"

Groman smiled. "Our ways part, don't they? I've thrown in here; once you're against them you're against me."

Suddenly he paused, his eyes softened. The mocking lines of his mouth relented.

"If you're thinking of my quitting and going straight, you can stop. There was once I would have tried, even though they'd get me sooner or later. But I would have tried." He smiled at Brennan. "You were there," he said softly. "I—I antagonized her, when all I wanted to do was to—to work—for her!"

BRENNAN'S eyes narrowed. He drew a quick breath. For a moment he stared at Groman, unable to

comprehend this sudden, unexpected glimpse of the man. And then Groman laughed, and he was himself again.

"But that was—once upon a time. Right now, all I can remember is that she was beautiful, and desirable. And I can't make myself love you too much, because it's you she cares for." His eyes glittered coldly. "Brennan, if killing you'd win for me, your life wouldn't be worth a nickel!"

There was a dead silence. Moore got slowly to his feet, wary and alert. Brennan's fingers twitched. Groman did not move. Then Brennan shook his head.

"All right, we'll close the subject," he said, tight lipped. "There's no truce between us. If you get in my way, Groman, you die. And if you mention Miss Walters again you'll be advancing the date."

Groman shrugged carelessly and started to turn away. Just then the three men whirled at a hail from between the buildings, and they saw El Latigazo striding toward them.

"We're ready," announced the chief, in high good humor. "You're starting in less than an hour, Jones. We divide into two parts, and the gentleman who met his fate with your guns usually handled the first. You will go ahead, at dusk, with three men an' Groman here. One of the men will know the way. You will clear the trail!"

Brennan nodded impassively. El Latigazo turned upon Moore. "You come wit' me, wit' the shipment. We have only a few men, but we must know all is clear. You, Senor Jones, will halt when you meet Senor Mulrew's men. They will have cattle. Senor Groman will return wit' them; an' when I come up, the rest of us will return here—unless there is trouble on the way."

Brennan nodded, considerably relieved. When he heard that he and Moore were to be separated, a dozen wild plans instantly began to chase through his mind. That might ruin everything. But evidently, Lou could come up with the chief.

And there were cattle!

Chinamen going one way and cattle the other. It was all coming clear now. Groman saw it, too. Brennan had a swift premonition. Groman was going to speak. His body tensed. He met the other man's cold eyes and saw the flame in them.

At that moment, Somatia gave a little laugh. "This is *magnifico*—danger an' excitement again, an' the greatest haul of all. An' the gold tonight. Mulrew sends it down. He is in a good humor, an' no surprise that he should be. I envy you, Senor Groman; there is a lady at the camp now!"

Brennan paled. It was fortunate that Somatia was looking at Groman. The latter stood rigid, unmoving; and slowly his smile came—a fixed, mirthless smile.

"A woman? But who?"

"The lady of the Double N. I do not know the story, but I think it was a mistake. Anyway, she will stay, for she cannot go now, wit' what she knows. Stay—wit' the rest of the secrets of the canyon, *Caramba!* If I had the col' blood of this Mulrew, I could be dictator of my country!"

CHAPTER XVII

"I'll Kill That Swine!"

BRENNAN was scarcely aware of the rest of the words. Cold, impassive as he was, inside he was writhing, and it was agony to have to listen to Somatia's sneering talk in silence. Groman never moved; he was tense as a statue, until the chief suddenly decided that he would take him off with him.

"We will not delay Senor Jones," he said. "He must be ready to start at once." He paused. "Jones, this is your first chance. I have seen you use guns. Remember that your task tonight is—to clear the way! There is no failure in our company—any more than there is treachery!"

For a moment his dark eyes glittered over Brennan's face; then he turned away, and Groman, without a sign to the other two, followed him. Moore scarcely dared look at his friend. When he did, Brennan was white to the lips.

"She—she's Mulrew's prisoner!" he articulated hoarsely. "Did you hear him? With the rest of the secrets of the canyon! God!"

Moore gripped his arm. "Buck up, son. We'll get in there some way. You've got to keep straightened out while yo're here, or we lose at the start. Don't tell me Latigazo ain't still a bit suspicious."

"I know." Brennan dug his nails into his palm. Suddenly he swung on the deputy. "All right, Lou. We'll get in. But we've got to get in before it's too late. If you see a break, never mind me. Get back to Bociera and get a posse through that canyon and to her!" His fingers dug into Moore's arm. "You promise me?"

"Pardner," answered the deputy slowly, "I'll let yuh rot in there if I see a way to get her clear."

"Good!" There was no more. Brennan went about the simple job of rolling his blankets and stuffing his saddle bags. He twirled the cylinders of his guns reflectively, and looked up, a moment later, as Groman came in.

Groman was expressionless. The bitterness had gone from his eyes. They were alive, fierce.

"I—I couldn't have known of this, Brennan. He just told me."

"What was it?"

"I don't know much. I didn't want to appear too curious. But it looks as though Mulrew was at the ranch last night when his men were moving Double N cattle, and Miss Walters rode out with her men after them. Mulrew went along. Killed her foreman, sent another man back for the wounded man at the house, and kidnapped her so she wouldn't tell what she had seen."

There was a moment of silence. Moore was looking at the outlaw.

"Well, Groman," he said at length, "what're yuh going to do?"

Groman whirled, his eyes blazing. "Do? I'll kill that swine—kill him with my own hands—and take her home!"

"And that'll do a lot of good!" Brennan cut in impatiently. "You'll be murdered in there yourself. You've got to work with us."

Groman's eyes narrowed. His old antagonism returned. "And let you be the galloping hero, eh? God, man, haven't I told you I love her?"

"What the devil does the hero part matter!" Brennan cursed. "She's got to be rescued — tonight! You're going ahead—along. We've got to stay behind. You must leave marks so we'll know the trail through that canyon, and have some signal to tell us when to come up."

Groman stared sullenly. It was plain that his arrogant brain had leaped forward to wild hopes of dashing off with Joan Walters across his saddle. He saw a chance whereby she might be his, if only for a moment. To his mind, such a moment was worth life itself. Selfish, arrogant, life or death mattered little to him compared with his desires.

"It's the only way," Moore put in.

Groman bit his lip. "What's your suggestion?"

"Leave chalk marks; there'll be a moon by the time we git in there. That trail's well hidden unless a man knows the way. Get to the house. Then we'll follow, as soon as we can get away from

Somatia, and wait. When the best moment comes, fire three shots in quick succession, and Lou and I will come."

GROMAN hesitated. Then, "All right," he agreed sullenly. "I'll leave the marks. If you lose them, it's your affair. And if you don't come quickly enough when I'm ready, I shan't wait." He turned to the door. "That's all!"

Brennan watched him swing away. "I can't trust him, Lou," he said. "He wants her for himself. Her danger is only an opportunity for his courage. And God knows he's got the courage."

Moore nodded. "But he may play square here. We'll see how it looks. He loves her, yuh know, Brad, in that wild, crazy way of his."

But Brennan saw little of comfort in the situation. A short time later one of the *mestizos* came and told him the men were ready to start. Brennan flung saddle bags and blanket roll over his shoulder and held out his hand to Moore.

"We'll meet up inside there," he said, "unless something goes wrong. If it does—"

"Count on me, Brad. Here's luck!"

Brennan went out. Saddling took but a moment. A Mexican named Raciga was assigned as guide. There were two other men—one a half-breed and the other a renegade American—beside Groman.

"We will meet you at moonrise," promised Somatia as they started.

Brennan nodded without expression. They passed between the quiet huts, and on the way out, circled around some twenty-five Chinamen huddled fearfully together in a little crevice of land behind El Latigazo's shack. These watched their progress with wondering, querulous eyes. Brennan felt tensely sorry for them. He looked at Groman, who was riding at his side.

"Groman, I don't envy you," he said, low voiced. "Look at those poor devils."

The outlaw drew down one eyebrow and obeyed with a supercilious stare. "You don't call them human, surely! Pawns, Brennan—just as we are. A man's got very little to do with what happens to his life, and all he can do to attend to it."

They entered the canyon. It was by a trail that Brennan had discovered several days before; only at that time, he had run into what looked like a blank wall where a small spring emerged from the rocks in a clump of willows. Now, at Raciga's grunted orders, they dismounted, went through the willows; and leading their mounts, scrambled up a steep face of rock to come out in a rock gully beyond. There was no sign to mark the gully as a trail, but trail it was.

Brennan mounted again thoughtfully. If Groman played him false, he was beginning to see how impossible it would be to penetrate this place without a guide.

CHAPTER XVIII

"Do Your Job!"

THE moon had not yet arisen. Brennan's band was proceeding cautiously. There were other men in these mountains beside themselves and Mulrew's crowd. Outlaws lived here, and some Indians. There were men, too, in Mexico who knew their dealings. Was there not danger of attack, El Latigazo would never have bothered to send on these men ahead, Brennan knew.

Yet this consideration bore little weight. They moved along single file, while the rocks on either side sloped to a V where their ponies set their feet.

Brennan came last, behind Groman.

Behind them, by now, El Latigazo would have started with his shipment of Chinamen. Brennan wondered casually again what happened to the yellow men on the farther side, and why Mulrew was in this game. Ahead were Mulrew's men, moving through the silent gorges along unmapped trails, with another contraband shipment—stolen cattle for Mexico.

And beyond, in the heart of the canyon of gold and secrets, was Joan, in the power of the scoundrel whose brain lay behind this traffic in souls and treachery.

Yet Brennan steeled himself. There was work to be done, little time for dwelling on sentiment or fear. Beside Groman, whom he could not trust, there were three men with him. When El Latigazo came up, with Lou Moore, there would be three or four men more. The Chinamen were not to be counted in, unless fear and ignorance made them run wild. Groman was an undecipherable quantity; he might go either way. And there were Mulrew's men—not many perhaps, but enough to run those cattle through.

Brennan shook his head. It was impossible to consider a showdown at the meeting place. The first thing to do was to let the two forces split. Let Groman go on. In some way, later, he and Lou had to win free and come back on Groman's heels.

When the path widened a trifle, he spurred up by the other's side. "I'm wondering how far we can count on you, Groman," he whispered. "For the sake of Miss Walters—"

Groman never looked up. His eyes were on the back of the Mexican riding ahead of him.

"Three shots—in quick succession," he said grimly. "Maybe you'll be there. I don't see how you'll get through. That's all. I'll fire the shots when it's time for you to come."

It was all he would say. Brennan dropped back in baffled silence. They rode on.

Presently Raciga held up his hand. They were approaching what looked to be a pass. Beyond it there was only darkness, where the towering bulk of the Sierras del Bedia brooded over these serried foothills.

They closed up. The opening in the rocks was reached just as the edge of a crescent moon began to climb out of the darkness. The movement of many bodies came from a level that was below the little party. Raciga pointed, as they got to the notch in the rocks, at a wide space formed by bulging shoulders of limestone formation centered about a smooth barren rock flooring. Out of this rose a man's figure, a rifle etched sharply as he held it across his crooked elbow; and from behind him a dust and a subdued lowing came, and the clatter of many hoofs, shod and unshod.

"This is the place," said Raciga. "They come now."

Brennan and his men rode into the open space and dismounted just as the first of the string of cows came through the dark gap. The moon was rising. The cattle came at a run, pouring through with bellowing and grunting. One vaquero rode near the head of the column. There must be others in the rear.

"Go through!" Raciga shouted above the confusion to the man in the lead. "The way is clear."

Presently two more vaqueros came; that was all. As Brennan watched the herd milled at the notch where he had just entered, and then slowly filtered through. The men stayed. It was then that Brennan understood. There was no need for herding them further. They must keep on in the narrow defile between the rocks until El Latigazo's men received them when they emerged.

BRENNAN'S eyes lighted. That would mean that most of the outlaw band would be stationed at the Mexican end of the canyon trail, to care for the rustled cattle. El Latigazo would need only a few for the task of herding along the obedient and docile Chinamen.

And then came another thought. Suppose Moore had been left at the other end?

He scarcely heard when Mulrew's man came up and was introduced. Another American this was, leading the two Mexicans who had helped herd the cattle. He scarcely even thought of Groman until there came a shout from down the trail. He sprang to his feet.

A moment later, with a whoop and yells, El Latigazo and his men drove a frightened, stumbling mass of yellow men through the notch, exactly as Mulrew's men had sent the steers in the opposite direction.

The outlaws were in fine fettle. El Latigazo had only three men with him, and one of them was Lou Moore. As Brennan sighed with relief, Groman shot him a sharp glance. He turned.

"Working from here Groman," he whispered. "There'll be no other chance to talk. Do your job!"

There was no answer. Brennan saw bottles being passed around; Somatia's men had brought them. There was shouting, laughter, cursing. The Chinamen huddled fearful and tremulous, in one corner of the rocky enclosure. Brennan stood aside and found that Moore was at his elbow.

"Only those two and Somatia," he said, pointing to the men. "And the two you brought with you. Together, if we work it right, we might be able to handle 'em—if we can take our time and count on Groman."

Brennan shook his head. A tiny fire had been lighted, and across from him, above the circle of sweating, flame painted savage faces, he saw the foreigner's profile. It was a handsome profile, cold and proud—yet, in the eyes, the flames started a strange light. Brennan shook his head.

"We can't trust Groman," he said distinctly. "We've got to take our chances and get back on his heels. He'll never leave a trail."

Moore shrugged. "All right. Give the signal when yo're ready." He moved away carelessly.

Brennan, his eyes following Groman, outwardly cool and yet inwardly fearful of what was to come, circled the flames and joined the chief of the band.

CHAPTER XIX

"THIS IS OUR NEW HOSTESS!"

JOAN had seen the moon rise from the patio in which she had been sitting since early evening. She had been conscious of a hum of activity about Mulrew's quarters all day, a subdued something that betokened the unusual.

She remembered little of the night before. It had been long and unending, bitter and harsh. Mulrew's mocking gallantry had only rendered the pain of her captivity the more acute. The shock of sudden discovery, the swift realization, in the space of a few pistol shots, of all that had taken place, numbed her faculties for hours.

Stubby shot down like a dog. The cowboy Resak dropped in his saddle—both from behind. San Lagen was probably finished by now. And she was a captive. Tears came to Joan's eyes—unwilling tears that fear or pain could never have wrung, when she realized that somewhere out in the dark, Brennan wandered, haunted by men, exiled, because of the machinations of this

fiend who now owned her.

It had been horrible. Swift though realization had been, it was many hours before Joan's numbed brain awakened and the whole thing became chiseled clear.

But full understanding had not yet come. It came after the dinner in the patio—a dinner at which Mulrew and Lanyski sat drinking bottle after bottle of rich wine when the food was taken away, their leering, jeering compliments growing more crude and impossible momentarily. She gathered that there was occasion for celebration—that she was not the only occasion.

She noticed that there were no Mexicans about, or Indians. If there were other American employees, they had gone sometime during the afternoon. There were only soft footed Chinamen, fearful and cringing at every word from the two white men—Chinamen everywhere.

Mulrew's house was built of three wings, enclosing a lovely patio in which palms and Spanish bayonet screened the front from a sharp declivity which gave into the mines. The entrance from the canyon trail through which they had come, was on the opposite side, in the center of the main building. Tall windows opened on the patio from indoors.

The table had been set for four. "We expect a guest, a business partner," Mulrew had told Joan when he ordered her to attend the meal. "We're not going to wait for him; he may be late." Then his mockery vanished and she saw the hard light in his colorless eyes. "So long as you behave, you won't complain of your treatment. But this isn't the Double N. In this canyon my word is law!"

But Joan had not tried to disobey. All that day he had allowed her to keep to a well furnished room he had assigned to her. A mute Chinaman had squatted outside her door. Joan had been able to see in the far distance, the winding of the beautiful canyon trail with its flushes of alternating yellows and mauve and crimson, until they faded into evening.

She had scarcely tasted her food. There were shadows under her deep eyes. She was silent. While Mulrew drank he leaned nearer and nearer to where she sat at his right side of the table under the stars.

Occasionally there was a breeze that came through the trees bordering the patio, and at such moments a sensation of fear and horror crept upon the girl. For borne upon the breeze was an odor —half human and half of decay; and sometimes she thought she could hear sounds like far off moans of helpless agony.

When she looked up, startled, Mulrew would laugh and Lanyski would join him.

"You'll learn a lot about this canyon before you leave here," the master said. "Maybe you'll like it, too. Anyhow, there's gold and there's luxury and power. And maybe—some day there will be a small empire!"

He was very close. His drinking had tainted his breath and his avid eyes were repulsive. His face was more heavy, gross. She shrank backward, conscious of Lanyski's thoughtful, waiting eyes. Mulrew laughed and caught her arm in his huge hand.

"Not yet, eh? Well, there's years, my dear girl. Years. Unless I get tired o' tryin' to break you."

A CHINAMAN came in, bowing, and spoke to Mulrew. Joan closed her eyes. Was it only yesterday that she lived on the Double N and wondered what had become of Brad Brennan? Only last week that she had admitted to herself, in happy surrender, that she wanted to hear him speak as she knew he must speak soon? This

was a different world. Mulrew's power made itself felt all about her; the abrupt transition from her former safety to her present dispelled any doubts she might have had of the man's insidious mastery.

"Bring him in—right away!" she heard Mulrew shout; and she opened her eyes. He was standing, somewhat unsteadily, gripping the table.

Joan looked toward the door opening and her breath stopped. Standing there was the slender, debonair figure of the man who had applied to the Double N for a job, Josef Groman.

He scarcely glanced at her; yet she thought there was a kind of message in his eyes. Lanyski watched him carefully. He came forward and took Mulrew's hand.

"So you're Groman! Glad to welcome you. There ain't many of us here, an' we pick our employees. But there's everything worth havin' right here!"

Lanyski stood up. "That is, if y' ain't too particular," he added coldly.

"I'm here." Groman met his hostile eyes. "If I'm not wanted, I'll go."

Mulrew laughed. "Nobody leaves here till we all leave at once!" he exclaimed. "Never mind that. You'll stay. I know all about you. Now, did y' bring the shipment?"

"It's here. I came with your men."

"Bueno!" Mulrew waved toward Joan. "This is our—our new hostess," he grinned. "Miss Joan, this is Captain Groman, late of the Austrian Army!"

She saw Groman's eyes flash with a dull anger. She met his look. He gave a stiff, formal little bow.

"I've met Captain Groman," she said icily, "when he was posing as an honest man."

Mulrew stared. Lanyski looked suspiciously at the new recruit. But Groman did not even smile.

"The *Fraulein* is right," he said, "except that at the time I was not posing. Any more," he added, "than I am posing now!"

CHAPTER XX

"The First Time They'd Seen Daylight in Two Years!"

THE atmosphere during the dinner which Groman ate alone, in spite of Mulrew's wine induced gayety, was oppressive. The newcomer scarcely looked at Joan. Lanyski kept his suspicious eyes fastened on the new recruit, except for an occasional sharp glance at the girl. Groman scarcely touched the wine.

"When you're finished," said Mulrew, "we'll go out and look over the shipment. All in good condition?"

"Apparently," Groman said. He looked up. "I can't help wondering how you get them out of here," he said.

Lanyski gave a snort. Mulrew laughed boastfully. "Groman, those hombres *ain't never goin' out of this canyon!* We send a few, when we got too many and need the cash. The rest I use personal. How in hell d'yuh think we work those mines?"

Groman started. Even his cold-blooded contempt for human life was stirred. He knew of Mulrew's mines. He had guessed from the conversation of Moore and Brennan that there was a secret connection with them. But this—

"These mines were idle for a good many years," Mulrew went on. "Indian labor got scare. The gold was all there. It took me to find the solution. There's always Chinks who'll pay to be smuggled over here. And nobody knows where they go. We take what they offer, and—well, we've put 'em across the line, ain't we? They might just as well stay here as anywhere."

He quaffed deeply from his goblet.

"Hope the new ones are healthy," he grunted. "Five of 'em died last week."

Groman was staring at him. Slowly the meaning of the words came to Joan. Horror overspread her features—horror she made no attempt to conceal. At sight of it, Lanyski laughed.

"When they died, it was the first time they'd seen daylight in two years," he said. "Gotta keep 'em locked up in there—we ain't got many men to handle 'em in case they get feelin' frisky."

Still Groman said nothing. Mulrew got up. "Come on. Let's look 'em over. We can come back later."

Lanyski followed him. Groman picked up his coffee cup and pretended to be finishing it. As he half rose, with the cup to his lips, he whispered across the table:

"I've just left Brennan. Be ready to make a break with me any second—tonight!"

He saw her startled, disbelieving eyes. "Believe me or not," he added. "Isn't anything better than this? Mulrew's drunk!"

He gave her no chance to reply. Turning, he joined Mulrew and the suspicious *segundo* at the door. Joan watched them go.

For a long time she sat in dull silence. But the question was simple enough and there was no argument. As Groman had said, anything was better than this. Anything! She shuddered as though with the cold as she sat there.

This was a canyon of slaves, and Mulrew was master. His coldblooded cruelty and ruthlessness gave her a feeling of utter helplessness. Those Chinamen—that half-human, half-decayed stench that came from the mine's mouth, on the breeze!

Groman sensed it as they rounded the clump of palms and made for the shadowy outlines of the gulch beyond. The canyon walls below them were painted silvery blue in the moonlight; and along a sort of ridge, there were numerous black holes cut into the rock face—round, worn holes that at that distance looked like the abodes of cliff dwellers.

He saw, however, that the trail from all these holes converged upon one spot, a shallow and wide hole below them. There was but one exit from this natural basin, and that was where two jagged rocks made a notch. Here the shining metal of a Hotchkiss gun loomed up grimly, and Groman needed to know no more.

The shipment of Chinamen was being forced through the notch and into the basin. A kind of wail came from the black holes. Groman thought he could distinguish shaven heads peering out. It was horrible, sickening. Ruthless a man as he was himself, it turned his stomach.

He thought of Brennan and of the girl in the power of this beast beside him; and he wished for the first time that he had kept his word and left the markings for Brennan along the trail.

"All here," Mulrew said, as the last of the stumbling, uncomprehending yellow men found his way through the notch. "Let's go back and finish up the wine. Groman, wha' d'yuh think o' the new hostess?"

"It's an unexpected pleasure," said Groman. "Suppose you and Lanyski finish the wine; I've been going hard all day and I'd like to sleep."

"Fair enough. Some valley t' get into, ain't it? Easier t' get in, though, than it is to get out!" Mulrew chuckled.

Joan had disappeared when the three men entered; and Groman went to a room on the second floor at once. He knew he had to work fast and was gratified to find that the patio roof ran underneath his window. As he slipped outside, gun at his hip and another inside his shirt, he could hear Mulrew's voice in the patio below.

"HOSTESS oughta be with host when 'e's drinkin'," he heard in thick accents. "Lanyski, she oughta be here. I'm gonna—"

"Take it easy, chief," came Lanyski's voice. "Give her time. Wait till she realizes that you're boss here, an' there's no way out."

Mulrew seemed to subside, but grudgingly. "All the same—" he grumbled.

"Yes," said Groman between his teeth, "there's damn' little time!"

It was scarcely fifteen minutes later that, fumbling along the windows opening on the patio roof, he reached the room occupied by the girl. He was ignorant of its location; but he knew that Mulrew and Lanyski were still below.

"Goin' bring her down an' be damned t' yuh, Lanyski—"

He touched a windowsill. "Miss Walters?"

From ahead came the whispered answer. "Here!"

He reached the next window. Her white face peered out at him.

"He's coming up!" Groman cried. "We've got to be quick."

"But what can we do?"

"I'm not sure. But I've got two horses and I've twisted wires around the gates of the corral. They won't open in a hurry, anyway. The best we can do is run for it. Know the way through?"

'Yes, but the pass is guarded."

"And I have a gun. Come on!"

His blazing, fearless eyes gave her confidence. They could hear Mulrew's cursing voice on the stairs. Joan slipped through the window and for a moment they crouched on the slanting, narrow roof. Then, Groman leading, they felt their way along toward the farther end.

Just as they reached it there came a yell, a wild cry of rage, a curse. Groman said nothing. His hands gripped the roof edge and he swung himself over. He dropped.

"Have to take your chances," he called up. "It's only a short drop."

But Joan hesitated no longer. In a moment she fell into his arms and straightened. Running feet pounded through the patio. Uproar commenced. Inside the house there was confusion and a medley of curses.

"Here they are, chief!"

Lanyski rounded the patio. Shoving Joan toward where two saddled mounts bulked among the trees, Groman crouched, and his two guns spoke just as Lanyski fired. The *segundo* swore and ducked for cover. Whirling, Groman broke into a run.

He found his saddle in a single leap. Joan was turning her mount's head. A volley of shots clipped through the trees and then Groman dug in his spurs.

"Three minute start!" he gasped. "Let's go!"

CHAPTER XXI

"Lou, Now!"

BRENNAN and Moore had seen Groman depart with reluctance. The former was certain. Something in Groman's glittering eyes had warned him that there would be no trail marked. It was with relief that they saw El Latigazo send on two of his men to assist in herding the cattle that had already been sent over the trail.

Thus it was a party of just five men that started over the route to El Latigazo's camp, and of these five, two were Brennan and Lou Moore.

They rode in silence. The Mexican, Raciga, led the way, as he had at first. The American, Ross, was next. After him, Lou Moore rode, and Brennan followed in the rear behind the leader.

He was undecided. So far as he could see, there was nothing for it but straight battle, and the sounds of gunfire might be heard. But he had to get back. Get back soon enough to get on the trail of Groman's crew before they should be too far ahead.

The trail narrowed still more perceptibly before a point which Brennan remembered, where it took a sheer drop into a half mile or so of wider space. Brennan glanced at Lou Moore's immobile back. Was Lou ready?

Strangely enough, it was El Latigazo himself who solved the problem. Turning, with a knowing smile, just before they entered the draw, he said, "I prefer to ride behind, Senor Jones. You will precede me here.

Brennan gave no sign. Nodding, he spurred up and waited, apparently, for Somatia to take the slide. The others had gone on. For a moment they were out of sight below.

Suddenly Brennan leaned forward, swung from his saddle, just as the forefeet of Somatia's horse started to slide downward. His forearm caught El Latigazo's throat and the bandit was jerked backward. A startled cry came from his lips.

"Lou, *now!*"

"Right!"

Brennan's gun came down across Somatia's temple and the sight notch started the blood as it struck. The cry died on Somatia's lips and he dropped inert. Springing free, as the riderless horse slid wildly down the incline, Brennan's two guns covered the men below.

Moore already had his forty-five out. "Stick 'em up, you hombres!" he rapped out.

There was a curse. Raciga, half hidden from Moore, whirled and brought out his gun. Brennan's two weapons spoke as one and the Mexican was down before he had pulled a trigger. Moore's weapons spoke and Ross slumped forward in his saddle, a single six-gun clattering to the rock flooring.

Brennan was coolly reloading as Moore turned. "Neat work, Lou. But there was some sort of a trap ahead. Somatia suspected us. He'd just told me to ride ahead of him and that's all he'll remember for awhile. He's asleep."

"Yeh, I had a hunch we were due for a trap before we got back."

Moore was cool. They spent little time on El Latigazo. At any moment men might come along, attracted by the shots. But they trussed him securely, and stuffed a thick gag between his teeth. Then Brennan leapt into his saddle.

"Come on, Lou. We've got to travel from here on."

They galloped off. The trail beyond the bowl where they had met the men from Mulrew's mine was clear for a good distance, It enabled them to close up the space that separated them from the slower moving body of men ahead.

Brennan's face was grim. "Not a sign of a trail," he pointed out. "I knew Groman'd double-cross us."

Moore only nodded. In half an hour they had picked up sight of their men far ahead of them, and cautiously they hung well in the rear. Through a succession of tortuous, winding defiles the procession wended its way. Occasionally a snatch of song drifted back to Brennan. But not often.

The moon was high overhead and bright when the end of the trail was sighted. Brennan and Moore rode out of a screened valley and saw a lone Joshua tree on the rise ahead. They moved on slowly. Voices were borne to them.

"Steady," warned Moore. "Look! there's a kinda ridge up there, behind them palmettos. Maybe we can see what lays ahead from there. This must be the camp."

Brennan nodded. Dismounting they

wormed their way over treacherous shale, through a tangle of mesquite that grew against the face of the sloping rock, and reached a thin ledge. From here, after they had passed the growth, they could lie flat and enjoy a complete view of Mulrew's canyon retreat.

A LITTLE below them the Chinamen were being herded toward the bowl of rock. Brennan saw two of the riders ride off carelessly and dismount before a corral, letting down the bars. He saw Groman, coolly confident, swing about the edge of the house where palms screened the patio, and disappear.

Moore swore aloud. From their position opposite, they were able to see partially inside the gloomy holes cut in the rock face.

"Smell that!" Moore gasped. "Men! Brad—my God!—do yuh savvy what it means now?"

"They keep 'em there. Chinks. But—"

"*Keep* 'em is right! Remember wonderin' about them mines? The Chinks think they're being smuggled across the border, and this is as far as they ever get. It's a slave mine, Brad—and that's how Mulrew gets his gold!"

"But—but the cattle!" Brennan's eyes suddenly lighted with comprehension as his thoughts ran beyond a stunned realization of what he saw. "I've got it! He wants my ranch—mine and the Double N! They completely surround the entrance to the canyon on the American side; and he wouldn't have to be afraid of people visiting him and seeing—this! He could make his headquarters on the Square D and cover his place completely!"

Moore nodded. "That's it, Brad," he said gravely. "Worse than a rustler—even a double-crossin' one—worse than a Chink smuggler. A slaver!"

There was a moment of awed silence. Both men had the same thought. It was Brennan who breathed it:

"And Joan's in his hands!"

"Not for long, son." Moore gripped his friend's arm encouragingly, as they lay there. "Not for long. Let's camp here till they're asleep. Let's see; there was three Mexes came with the cows. That's an Americano over on that machine gun where the Chinks went through. Mulrew an' Lanyski an' maybe one or two more. But we're good for a surprise attack. Let's wait till the moon goes, an' see what happens."

CHAPTER XXII

"If It Doesn't—"

GROMAN could not have guessed that his erstwhile companions were within sight of Mulrew's rendezvous. Had he known, when he rode off with Joan and heard the first excited stir of pursuit behind him, he would gladly have called upon them. In that moment the man was thinking only of the girl at his side, her sweetness and allure, and his one reckless wish was to get her out of Arlen Mulrew's clutches.

But in the first bolt, they had the advantage. The cool rush of the night wind against his face, the stretching black under him, the ribboning trail pallid under the waning moon—these things and the presence of the girl at his side, restored to Groman all of his old arrogance and power. The pursuit appeared to be slow in starting.

There might be a picket ahead, even two. But these were nothing. Groman had never known fear. The presence of ordinary danger only added zest now.

Smiling, he glanced at Joan. Her face was set. Gravely she turned to look at him. Then, at some quality in his smile, the light in his eyes, her own

eyes narrowed swiftly in apprehension and she looked quickly away.

"Don't worry," he said reassuringly. "We'll make it. We can outrun these fellows, and ahead—"

He broke off sharply and instinctively he pulled in a little at his bridle. The trail, winding upward in long curves, almost completely revealed in the moonlight, was no longer empty. Two men, rifles part of their profiles against the gray rocks behind them, debouched from a clump of mesquite and pinon and stood in the road.

Far above, where Joan knew the canyon debouched into the open of the mesa, another picket stood outlined against the sky.

"They've got rifles!" she cried. "And the road's all open. There isn't a chance!"

For an instant, his bold eyes flamed with eagerness, the zest of danger. He seemed about to court certain death by riding directly for the two men who, with their rifles, could pick him off without trouble before he got within pistol range. At the point in the trail at which they were, they could even take cover and wait for him to come up. Thus he would be trapped.

Near at hand, though, there was an alternative. A hump of ground rose at the right. Beyond it, though the slopes rose again, Joan was aware that the eastern foothills of the Sierras went eventually downward. The ground was less level and there might be a hiding place.

"Over there!" she cried, and pointed. "It's the only way!"

Groman reined in. His eyes blazed. His face was distorted with anger.

"Hurry!" commanded the girl. "If we don't take that way, we're trapped!" He nodded, "Come on!"

Over the steep ridge they forced their mounts. Then down a sliding face of shale into a ravine. It was dark here. Behind them two shots of warning rang out sharply.

Groman took the lead, cursing himself vainly. The moon was waning rapidly now. They plunged in almost complete darkness through the interminable length of the ravine in which they found themselves. Going was difficult and slow and before long they heard confused cries from somewhere in the rear.

The ravine came suddenly to an end. Groman pulled up instinctively, rising in his stirrups. Immediately at their feet another steep descent began. There appeared to be water at the bottom, a shallow stream and narrow; and beyond, for three or four miles, hemmed in between mountainous ridges, was open country.

"We'll take it," Groman said grimly. "There's no other way. Game?"

Joan nodded. "Go ahead," she said.

Groman put his horse to the long bank. The animal balked, but then obeyed. In a moment both steeds were sliding and stumbling down the incline. They brought up at the bottom without mishap and found the stream easily fordable.

Just then a shot barked out. There was a jet of flame from the summit they had just left. Without comment, Groman spurred his animal and they went into the water. Scrambling up the farther side, the two fugitives raced up the incline, while behind them, two more mounts were beginning the long slide down to the bottom.

One rider was spilled. But another came and the first went tumbling down after his horse.

"Look!" Joan exclaimed. "Isn't that a cabin?"

It was on a sort of promontory, facing sheer open space, and behind it was a rock wall. Groman's mount was laboring. He nodded, glancing behind him.

THE pursuit was catching up. The first two men were out of sight momentarily, at the bottom of the slope. A third was running afoot after his horse. At the top of the opposite hill, two more mounted men were commencing the descent. A bullet pinged by—close! Another kicked up the dust in front of Joan's horse.

"We've got to take shelter there," Groman said slowly. Then his eyes blazed. "Maybe help will come. If it doesn't, we're finished."

Joan looked away. Her first fear and revulsion for this man swept over her. But there was no alternative. The moon was almost below the horizon. When Groman pulled over his mount's head and made for the shack, Joan followed. In the rear, Mulrew's riders were spurring fast, belaboring their mounts, yelling wildly, and firing rifles from the saddle.

Groman drew his gun when they reached the tiny cabin. But it was vacant. Empty and forlorn it looked, forgotten. A lonesome door banged to and fro with a faint breeze, in ghostly cadence. They entered unspeaking.

But the single room of the interior, rude and dusty, told no story of its one-time occupants. Perhaps the low roofed structure had been an Indian's home—an Indian who had camped too near to Mulrew's mine. There was not even a table. Across two boxes, long boards were stretched and there was aged straw thrown across them. That was all.

Joan found her lips trembling. The two long nights and the day just past had worn her down. The flight and the escape had been hazardous enough; but now the knowledge that they could go no further, that this lonesome, barren spot saw the end of everything, was the last straw.

Groman slammed shut the door and turned to her. He must have sensed her emotion. After a moment of hesitancy, he stepped close and caught her hands.

"You're not afraid!" he exclaimed. "You're too game—and too wonderful. Something'll happen!"

His voice trailed off. He went to the tiny, paneless window and stared off down the slope. Joan saw his profile, watched it. Something inside her compelled the words, "If it doesn't?"

He whirled. Behind him she caught a glimpse of a rider against the skyline. Groman's face was desperate. Even in the dark his eyes were aflame.

"If it doesn't, I couldn't ask for a better finish," he said tensely. "Good God, do you think dying could mean anything to me, when I was willing to face capture and death just to be near you? A glorious finish! I've never asked for more of life than that and there's none more glorious than with you!"

Joan's first revulsion was gone. She sensed that this man was half mad, in his flaming passion, his contempt equally for life or death of men. It was no longer revulsion. She felt a deathly, gripping fear such as she had never known.

From down the slope there was a voice of command, and before either of the two fugitives could speak again, a rifle cracked and a slug of lead thudded into the opposite wall.

CHAPTER XXIII

"Stay Steady! Don't Move!"

UPON hearing the shots fired by Lanyski when Groman and Joan made their getaway, Brennan's first action had been to scramble to his feet. But Moore pulled him down.

"Steady, pardner!" he cried. "I don't know what in hell yuh think yuh'll do down there now, but it's best to wait."

Brennan hesitated, then nodded agreement. The shots might mean anything. Groman might have got into trouble, and there was no reason for helping him. The two on the ledge had not seen the fugitives ride off, and there were no more shots.

Then other men rode away. The watchers remained puzzled. As the moon commenced to wane they could see little. But a certain quiet came over the hacienda. The Chinamen had been driven into their holes, and except for an occasional mournful wail from there, there was no sound. A lone sentry was in sight, slumped behind the Hotchkiss gun.

Brennan was fretting. "Must be about time now, Lou," he muttered. "Now or never. There aren't so many of 'em and most must be asleep."

He broke off suddenly. From up the valley, a rifle shot came. It was followed by a second.

Brennan got to his feet, his features grim. "We're startin' now," he decided. "There's things happening in this canyon tonight." As Moore joined him, he continued: "Drop down here and take the house. I'll get this hombre at the machine gun. If you meet Groman, shoot to kill—but find Joan first. I'll be with you as soon as this fellow's taken care of."

With only a nod, Lou Moore slipped off into the dark. Brennan went in the opposite direction. Silence fell again.

Some five minutes later, the man at the machine gun sat up with a start. Over the edge of the rock against which he leaned, a forty-five rested. From behind it came a cool voice, "Stay steady, *amigo*. Don't move!"

The man's hands shot upward. He gave a gasp of fear and astonishment. Brennan took scarcely twenty seconds to disarm him. He wore a single pistol; that was all.

"Now—get up and march!" Brennan ordered. "And be careful. We don't want to wake anybody; *sabe?*"

"There's nobody—"

"Shut up! When I want you to talk you'll talk plenty. March!"

They found a way through the trees hiding the patio; and just as they emerged, Lou Moore came running out from the house.

"It's empty!" he cried.

"What?"

"Cleaned out. One Chink cook in there, so frightened he couldn't talk. I think he's a mute, anyhow. But that's all. Every room empty, and I found hers. Plumb gone!"

Brennan's mind leapt backward. "Those shots!" he exclaimed. "She got away with Groman!"

Moore nodded. "That's it—an' they'll never make it."

If Brennan had let impulse and impatience capture him once or twice during the long night, they were gone now. Face to face with a danger that superseded all others, the threat to Joan's safety, he was rigid, cold as steel, and in his eyes was a ruthlessness that boded ill for man, beast or devil that got in his way.

He turned first to his captive. "Start talkin' now," he said, "and talk fast. If you don't, I won't shoot you. I'll simply dismount that Hotchkiss o' yours and let the Chinks in there know they're free!"

Whether it was this prospect or Brennan's eyes which decided the captive, there was no argument. "They escaped!" he hastened to say. "The new man and the chief's girl. Tryin' to make the pass, I guess."

"Who's in the way?"

"Three. There's the lookout at the opening. Two others. They're breeds and rifle shots. I thought I heard—"

"How many's gone after them?" Brennan cut in.

"Mulrew an' Lanyski—an' three more. Two of 'em are Mexes. That's all there was here, except me." As Brennan was silent, he went on. "That's all, *amigo*. Don't leave me here for them Chinks, will yuh?" He shivered.

But Brennan seemed not to have heard him. "Five o' them," he muttered. "And then the other three, if they've joined. Probably the lookout will stay where he is. Let's go, Lou. With an even break, we can do it. Maybe we can count on Groman for some help, if he's not already dead."

THEY locked their single captive into a small house where munitions and dynamite were kept, and ten minutes later, recovering their horses, were streaking over the road which Joan and Groman had taken hours before with Mulrew at their heels.

The moon had been out of sight some time. It was drawing toward morning. No rifle shots marred the silence of the canyon. There was no human sound.

Nothing—until, rounding a curve at a gallop, they came suddenly face to face with two men, armed with rifles. One was scaling a high wall of rock.

"The breeds!" Moore shouted his warning.

The rifles came up, but not as quickly as the swift drawn pistols of the two riders. Neither had a break in his stride. Four shots had barked out before either of the two men in the road had fired.

The first tumbled backward from the embankment—Moore's man, instantly dead. The second writhed, groaning, in the road.

There was no expression in Brennan's face. He jerked his mount to its haunches and leapt to the ground. "They didn't get past here," he flung over his shoulder, and bent down over the man on the ground.

"Mirao, hombre!" he exclaimed. "Look at me!"

The glazed eyes saw and a shudder ran through the frame. But there was no pity in Brennan's face. "You're dyin'," he advised, "and maybe I'll let you die easy. But you won't unless you tell me what happened to my friends. Which way did those two riders go?"

The breed stared, helpless, agonized with pain. Brennan's fingers dug into his shoulder. He gasped, waved an arm weakly over the ridge. "There," he croaked.

Brennan whirled to his feet. "There's pony marks down here!" Moore yelled. "This way—lots of 'em."

"Good!" Brennan swung into his saddle. "Let's go!"

They rode. The sky was paling slightly as they reached the opening from the ravine, where Joan and Groman had made their descent to the shelter of the watercourse below. Dawn was coming when, at the foot of the hill, having forded the stream, they halted at the sound of a rifle shot from above them.

"They're just ahead," Moore said. "Take it easy, Brad; there's five. If nothin's happened by now, we can afford to use judgment. It'll be daylight right pronto, an' there's no use stumblin' into 'em in the dark."

They commenced a cautious ascent of the steep slope.

CHAPTER XXIV

"We'll Set Your Damned Shack Afire!"

GROMAN was staring through the open window of the shack with feverish, bright eyes. Behind him Joan lay on the makeshift cot

in restless slumber. It was not really sleep, for every few minutes she awakened with a start as a rifle shot echoed through the valley.

For two hours, Mulrew had given these periodic warnings that he was there.

Dawn was coming now. Groman had seen the two figures on the opposite hill, and he had seen them disappear. The distance was too great for recognition; but he told himself that it might be Moore and Brennan. Not that it would matter.

He knew Mulrew's plans. The mine owner would wait until morning, sure of his ground. He could either starve them out or make a rush and finish it. In either event, there was no hope.

Groman's restless eyes kept returning to the girl. As she lay there, she was unbelievably lovely, unbelievably young and girlish in her half sleep, her utter weariness.

Dawn. The chill was in his bones. He looked at Joan. She had trusted him, yes. Yet for her he had been willing to give up freedom, to sacrifice life. What matter that she had not asked it? What matter the thing that he knew; that she loved Brennan?

The day was coming. He could see the boulders and the crevices in the slope behind which Mulrew's men had taken cover, and he smiled a thin smile. What chance would Brennan have even if he did come; what chance to cover that open slope without a blade of grass for protection?

"Ho there, Groman!"

Mulrew's voice, Joan awakened with a start, her limbs rigid. She sat up, wide eyed, staring at him. Groman moistened his lips again.

"Go ahead, Mulrew. What is it?"

"Sunrise!" came with a laugh. "Going to finish you, Groman, right now. You've got ten minutes to decide. Turn over the girl and we'll forget that you wanted her as much as I did."

Groman started. His cheeks went white. Slowly he turned to Joan.

They looked at each other, unspeaking for a moment. She was doubly lovely in her pallor, her utter helplessness. A helplessness the more feminine because he remembered so well her arrogance and pride. Her red lips parted and her wide eyes pleaded. Groman's eyes sprang to flame.

"Ten minutes!" he cried. "Ten minutes, Joan. Good God, girl, we're at the end of the world. There's nothing from here on. But I tell you it's worth it all, if I can hold you in my arms!"

For a second Joan's eyes leapt with admiration for the wild, untamed spirit of the man.

"Tell me, Joan—"

One white hand fluttered against his shoulder. Joan was shaking her head.

"Give me a pistol, if you care that much," she said, her voice hoarse.

HE saw the agony in her eyes and his own fell. Perhaps for the first time at the brink of death, Groman realized what all this meant to her. Her eyes told him; her words confirmed their message. This was no game to her, this thing called life, as it was to him. It was more than a moment, more than a gesture. It was an ideal.

"I'm a fool," he said hoarsely. "Why the devil didn't I let Brennan help?"

"Ready, Groman?" came Mulrew's hard voice.

He did not move. She had interpreted his words. During the silent hours just passed he had told her something of what had happened since Brennan's escape.

But her eyes were beyond him, fixed far down the level slope, at moving objects discovered by the pink and yellow of early dawn. They widened. Groman whirled.

"Look!"

He cursed. The crooked sombreros were not to be mistaken. Brennan and Moore lay half concealed, far down the slope, still out of sight of the besiegers of the shack. But once they stood up, there were three hundred yards of open space without cover of any sort.

"It's they. They got here!" Suddenly Groman gave a harsh, croaking laugh. "And for what? They've got as much chance of getting to us, with four or six men there—why, they're dead as soon as they stand up."

He had seen the flush of hope stain her pale cheeks at sight of Brennan. Now Groman saw Joan's red lips droop; saw the color flee.

"He mustn't come," she whispered.

Groman did not answer. Pale and silent, he stood watching her. The pride drained from his bearing. His eyes flickered over the covering of Mulrew and his men. He heard Mulrew's challenge—

"Last chance, Groman."

Suddenly steel took Groman's limp frame. His eyes lighted again, with the light of utter daring.

"I—I'll fix it," he said. "One way or the other, you've given me the thrill that is life, Joan. Here's to happiness, from Karl von Steglitz—and—*adios!*"

She stood horrified, stricken to stone. She saw him swing open the door and heard him drop down the bar.

CHAPTER XXV

"Brad! The Warning!"

BRENNAN and Lou Moore had crept up the hill as daylight came. With full light they could see the hopelessness of their position. They were only partially in concealment. At any moment they might be discovered and become the target for five rifles.

They heard Mulrew's last challenge and Brennan tightened his belt.

Grim-lipped he turned to his companion. "We start when they do, Lou," he said softly. "Whatever happens, try to get Mulrew."

Moore nodded. There was no need for words. They were doomed men—self-doomed. But if Mulrew could be downed, at least one menace was removed from Joan's way.

Then suddenly they saw the door of the shack open. Moore gasped with surprise. They saw Groman outlined there, pistols in either hand. He wavered for an instant.

He moved. Suddenly he was staring toward where Mulrew lay. The first shot came. There was a curse. Then from Groman's gun there came three quick shots in rapid succession. Still he charged on. Puffs of smoke came from behind the rocks.

Moore leaped to his feet. "Those three shots! Brad! The warning!"

Through Brennan's humming brain there filtered only a vague recollection of the signal they had arranged. He saw that the attention of Joan's pursuers was centered entirely upon the madman swooping down upon them.

Brennan and Moore started on a run. They were not observed. Groman came on down the hill, his guns banging as he came, a slim, wild figure, laughing—laughing like a fiend as he came. One of Mulrew's men fell backward.

Brennan ran. He saw spurts of lead kicking up the dust all about Groman. He saw Groman stop in his wild stride, stagger—keep on. Again!

Moore fired. One of the Mexicans slumped forward.

Brennan was close enough now to see Groman's face. It was distorted with bitterness and contempt. He kept on walking, weaving now, toward Mulrew. Blood streamed down over his left arm.

His pistol fell. The air sang with lead. Blood stained his shirt.

Groman fell forward to his knees—laughed—flung up his pistol again and fired. Then he dropped face downward.

It was then that a shout of fear came from Lanyski; then that Brennan opened fire. Walking steadily on he came, pistols at his hip. Mulrew whirled. The third man fired wildly, crying aloud in fear. Mulrew understood now. Brennan was too close. Groman's strategy had worked. Flinging away his rifle, Mulrew flashed out his six-shooter savagely. Lanyski, on one knee, followed suit.

For the space of three seconds then the air was blue and white with powder smoke—smoke with vicious red jets of flame stabbing through. Brennan's gun was empty. There was an utter silence.

Arlen Mulrew lay on his face. Lanyski was writhing out his life three feet away. The third man had been dead for several seconds. From Brennan's thigh, staining even his thick chaps, a trickle of blood ran. Lou Moore bore not a mark. Brennan was white. His eyes were on the prone body of Karl von Steglitz, who had been Groman.

"He gave the signal, at that, didn't he?" Brennan said. He took a step forward and dropped to one knee as his left leg crumpled. "Lou, get Joan."

When Moore made off, Brennan lay there, his eyes on Groman thoughtfully. The others he did not notice. He had not known them well enough even to hate them deeply. Mulrew was an enemy by name, a man who had played a losing game in an attempt to dominate the valley. He had picked the wrong victims.

But Groman! For him Brennan had known hate, admiration, distrust: here was a man whose memory could not fade. His lips twisted. He sighed.

"I reckon you finished just about as you'd have had it, though, eh —pardner? In one grand blaze!"

THERE were many men sliding down the steep incline across the valley. They did not come up for some time, and by then they had been recognized. When they arrived, Sheriff Ramsey and Sam Lagen, stiff and white, but game, were at their head.

"All over?" Lagen grinned. "I went out after yuh that night, Miss Joan, an' I found—Stubby. Dead. So was Resak. Then I went back cautious like, an' spent about ten hours playin' hide an' seek with one o' these hombres who came back to finish me. Oh, he talked before he cashed his chips."

They talked swiftly. Moore was explaining the coup in detail. Brennan did not hear. He was sitting upright beside a tiny spring and Joan was at his side. Her hands were in his and her eyes were tender and misty.

"What are they talking about?"

She smiled. "You, I think. They've just found out that you're a hero—or something." She gave a little involuntary shudder. "I thought you were going to be killed. That was why he went out as he did, to draw their fire. Brad, these awful things won't ever happen again—tell me no!"

He pressed her hands a little tighter and gave a tender little smile. "If I tell you no, Joan, will you tell me yes to that little question o' mine?"

She flushed, and imperceptibly she was closer to him, so near that his lips could almost touch her hair.

"I suppose," said Joan, " I suppose I'll have to do my share for the peace of the valley. You seem to be the trouble-shooter. Shall we announce it now?"

"No," Brennan drawled. He was tired and worn and pleasantly aware of an invalidism that she would have to attend. "Wait till I'm able to celebrate with 'em."

Buckskin Vengeance

by BRAD BUCKNER

Author of "Hell of an Hombre," etc.

Gil Traynor was a mighty-thewed trapper, Grizzly Tom was a gnarled veteran of the fur lines, Ollie Nevers was a frail little newcomer—but in that blood-and-hell showdown outside Fort Winton, Destiny levelled the three —to men!

IT was a curiously unmatched trio that rode the fur-laden pirogue down the booming flood waters of the Gallatin toward Fort Winton, largest post of the Northern Fur Company. Sitting on his heels in the stern of the craft, Gil Traynor drew his paddle through the dirty white water in mighty strokes. His voice rose lustily as he sang a *voyageur chanson*, ringing clearly above the hiss and rumble of the Spring crest. Gil was a man among men in a country where strength and power were common assets. He was mighty in his frayed buckskins. His leonine head sat on a thick neck. Muscles writhed beneath his jacket with each driving stroke. His pale eyes glinted amusedly at the smaller man in front of him struggling to keep up the paddle rhythm. His voice broke in a mocking laugh.

Gil was contemptuous of Ollie Nevers. He couldn't see the stout heart inside the frail body of the little trapper, for Gil measured a man by his size and ability to

handle himself in a fight, and in these respects, Ollie Nevers was . . . a runt.

On the fur trails, Gil was a hard man to follow. His pace was killing and Gil derived amusement from taxing that diminutive body in front of him. Now, as Ollie worked heroically to match Gil's paddle strokes, the big man laughed again and dug in deeper, faster. Ollie's bones cracked in his effort to keep up. When his paddle knifed water, Gil's voice lifted in taunt. But Ollie kept on, though his heart was thudding painfully from the exertion. He said nothing.

The third of this unmatched trio was an oldster. He was grizzled and gnarled. His eyes were sharp and the cadaverous body underneath his mountain raiment was like whang leather and steel. His thin face was matted with beard. A long mane of iron gray hair flowed from underneath his coonskin cap and fell around his block-like shoulders. Grizzly Tom was a veteran of the fur lines. He had trapped thousands of miles over the Yellowstone wilderness with Jim Bridger and had made rendezvous in Taos with Big Bill Williams. He was known by no other name than Grizzly Tom. It was probably that he had even forgotten his real one. It didn't matter anyway.

A year ago he had joined with Gil Traynor and Ollie Nevers and had been amply repaid. The pirogue was piled high with prime plew from the beaver, marten, mink, silver fox. And now they were headed for rendezvous . . . frolic and fluff, fighting and plenty of rum.

He scowled somberly as he watched Gil increase the speed of the craft. He knew it wasn't Gil's desire to reach Fort Winton in record time that motivated this race. From time to time he saw the amused light in the big man's eyes as he stroked faster and faster. And he saw the pained expression in Ollie's face as he struggled to keep up the furious pace. He read the satisfaction Gil derived from showing off his strength to the smaller man. Scorn claimed him and his heart went to the . . . runt, and then he was voicing his disapproval.

"Confound it, Gil!" he growled. "Yo're goin' to have this durn kettle ridin' clear out of the water if you insist in goin' at this speed. 'Sides, yo're makin' niggers o' me'n Ollie tryin' to keep up. A body'd think yuh never saw civilization before!"

"Shucks, Grizzly," Gil boomed. "I'm jest workin' up a thirst fer Ollie! An' I'm honin' to see Jules Fabian's eyes pop out when he sees these prime plew. There ain't another catch like 'em, I'll swear, in the whole Yallerstone." He laughed. "An' we poached 'em right under the nose uh the Pacific Company! We'd a been at Winton already if you two weaklin's would pitch in with them paddles!"

He laughed heartily. Ollie gritted his teeth and bore down harder. He idolized the big trapper for the magnificent body he possessed. But as a man . . . well, Ollie was not over five foot two. Beside gaunt longhairs and burly voyageurs, he was a dwarf. He was always conscious of his slight build and often gazed long in admiration at Gil Traynor. He wished mightily that he might possess such a physique, such strength, but he resigned himself to the fact that he wasn't that fortunate.

OLLIE cursed himself silently when he did Gil Traynor's bidding. He wasn't afraid of Gil. The man had never resorted to violence in dealing with him. But Gil always made him feel so damned little. Even smaller than he was. Many times he had told himself that he would tell Gil to go to hell, but he went right on being the

faithful servant and Gil Traynor went right on being ungrateful.

The canoe swung around a bend and Fort Winton pushed into view. A loud whoop rose from the moving figures on the bank. As the canoe came closer to the post the figures merged into buckskin clad trappers. They rushed down to the water's edge when Gil and his partners put the boat into shore. Loud greetings were called and jugs were hoisted into the air.

"What's ben holdin' you fellers," one shouted. "We ben layin' four tuh one that the Sioux had counted coup on yuh an' there's no takers."

"We don't give in so easy as some," cackled Grizzly Tom. "Hell, ain't no sense in comin' in in the middle of the winter."

"We been held up by a broken paddle," Gil Traynor's voice rose above the rest. "Here, let's have a snort uh that rum, or have yuh just got the jug tuh look at."

He grasped one of the stone flagons from an outstretched hand and took a heavy pull at it. Then he gave it to Grizzly Tom who in turn handed it to Ollie.

The trappers held the canoe while the three men stepped on to the muddy bank. Then they hauled the boat ashore.

"I'll bet none uh you can beat that," bragged Gil. "A hundred an' fifty there an' I never lost a plew. Come on, the drinks are on me."

He threw his arms around the shoulders of two more oldsters and they marched toward the post. Grizzly Tom was wrangling with one of his former cronies and Ollie Nevers trailed along at the rear.

Fort Winton was teeming with life. Trappers moved in and out of the gates. There were Canucks and burly 'breeds. Blanketed warriors from a neighboring village of friendly Nez Perce went to and fro inside the stockade. Most of the activity centered at a low building just inside the gate. This was the post saloon, commonly known as the grog shop. As Gil and his companions entered they were greeted by a mingled clamour of loud voices and drunken shouts. The thick air of the interior reeked with the stench of liquor and the odor of tobacco smoke. Furs lay piled on tables about the room and in one corner a squeaky fiddle was grinding out a tune and two old trappers were jigging.

Gil stalked up to the bar with the two buckskin trappers still under his huge arms. He pounded his fist heavily on the rough planking.

"Drinks for the house, bottles," he bellowed. "Gil Traynor's buyin' an' everybody's drinkin'."

There was a general rush in that direction and the two breed bartenders were busy with the rum jugs.

Ollie Nevers had slipped into the saloon unnoticed. Now he also bellied up to the rough hewn bar. He was about to take his drink when a big Canuck with black whiskers pushed in beside him and shoved him roughly aside. The man was drunk and Ollie glared at him while he took his place at the bar. Then the Canuck turned and grinned evilly at Ollie.

"Don't lak it, huh?" he growled. "An', *mon enfant,* what do you propose to do about it? By gar, I tink I trounce you anyhow."

With a heavy hand he collared Ollie and started cuffing. Ollie fought back as best as he could but he was no match for the bigger man.

At the commotion, Gil Traynor's head came up like a fighting cougar sensing battle. His wind burned lips curled in a grin at the prospect of a good rough fight. He turned and in three strides he was at the side of the big *voyageur*. He grasped the man by the

arm and hauled him around.

"A scrapper, huh?" he grated. "Maybe yuh'd like a real fight instead of goin' around pickin' on cripples."

"So," sneered the Canuck. "The he-wolf he look for fight? An' Pierre LaFarge he always be the one to oblige. *Tres bien,* I weel give you the fight."

Pierre LaFarge's hairy fist shot out and Gil ducked the blow. He countered with a jolt that sent the Frenchman spinning. Everybody in the building gathered around the immediate vicinity of the conflict. When a fight was in progress everything else was forgotten, even drinking.

While Gil and the big *voyageur* were locked in the bloody combat there were shouts of encouragement from the sidelines. "Hammer 'im down, Gil," some one said. "Give the Canuck what he's got comin'." And from another quarter. "Keel the *loup chien,* Pierre," and the voices broke into mixed French and English.

There were two who took no part in the bantering and the encouragement. Ollie Nevers watched the fight in admiration and old Grizzly Tom scowled.

GIL TRAYNOR and Pierre LaFarge were standing in the center of the circle trading blows, swing for swing. There was little fighting science connected with it. In this primitive country the best defensive fighting was considered to be a murderous offensive.

Both men's faces were cut and bruised. Pierre LaFarge's nose was broken and one of Gil's eyes was practically swelled shut. But Gil's blows were taking their toll. His was a spirit that couldn't be daunted by a man of his equal in strength. Finally he hit the Frenchman and Pierre fell backward. He laid groggily on the floor and did not rise. Gil Traynor knew that Pierre had enough. Pierre tried to raise his head and Gil sent a moccasined foot into his face and Pierre LaFarge dropped back to the floor.

"That was the *coup de grace,*" laughed Gil loudly and turned back toward the bar.

He was acclaimed as the hero of the gathering, the champion for the little fellow who would have been unable to take care of himself. And Gil was glorying in it.

Ollie sidled up. "I'm much obliged to yuh, Gil," he said. "Yuh sure took the big feller's taw."

"Hell, it wasn't anything," roared Gil. "Anyway, I knew you wouldnt have much chance standin' up ag'in him." There was a peal of laughter and Ollie slunk away more completely humbled than he had been before.

Old Grizzly Tom was utterly disgusted with the whole business. He knew why Gil had taken up Ollie's cause. He had seen through Gil's purpose before a blow had been struck. Gil Traynor loved nothing in the world better than to show off. There had been other times when Ollie had needed Gil's assistance, his strong body for protection, just as he had today. But there had been nobody there to watch, to acclaim him victor over his vanquished foe; and Ollie had done for himself as best he could.

Rendezvous was over. A week of fun and drinking had sufficed and now Gil Traynor and his companions had set off again into the wilderness. There was another season and they had to stake out their territory. Each year the competition was getting stiffer and furs were becoming more scarce. Soon it would be only the shrewdest and the hardiest who would be able to take a living out of the streams and mountains of the Yellowstone country.

The trappers had been paid off in gold and they carried it with them along the trails. What was left after Gil had blown it in for fooforaw had

bought needed supplies.

They struck off southward toward the Snake River country. There was territory that was harder to get into and it might promise richer reward for the coming season.

A couple of nights later when they made a camp in a little clump of quaking aspens Gil and Grizzly Tom were sitting around the dying camp fire before turning in. Light wisps of blue smoke curled up from the kinkinnick in the old trapper's stubby pipe. Ollie Nevers had turned in earlier and was now sleeping soundly.

"Don't yuh ever git tired uh showin' off?" asked old Grizzly Tom slowly, but the abruptness of the question caused Gil to sit bolt upright.

"What do yuh mean by that, old man?" demanded Gil.

"I was just wonderin'," said the old man and he lapsed into silence.

For all of Gil's questioning and baiting he could get nothing more out of the old trapper and finally he, too, sank into a silent meditation. He knew what Tom was driving at. He had seen the look of disgust on Grizzly Tom's face before and he suspected that the oldster disapproved of his actions. But Gil told himself that he had done Ollie a favor and in truth he had. But in his arrogance and conceit he couldn't see that it had been because he wanted to show off. Old Tom didn't know what he was talking about, Gil told himself. Hell with him; he and Ollie both would have a hard time getting along if they didn't have Gil to get them over the rough spots.

He leaned over to push a small burning brand back on the fire when suddenly he sat up and listened. A twig cracked in the shadows outside the circle of firelight. His first thought was Indians but then he thought that Indians didn't attack at night. He keened his ears through the silence but there was no more sound. He relaxed again, telling himself that his ears were playing tricks on him. He turned to speak to old Grizzly Tom but his words were never uttered. The night was split by a loud blood-curdling whoop.

Shadowy figures darted in from the brush and Gil and Grizzly Tom were on their feet. Gil saw suddenly that they were Indians. Then he saw the evil features of Pierre LaFarge grinning ghoulishly. He knew at that instant that the Indians were renegades, fired up with rotgut until they were ready to attack at any time.

In that instant Gil's mind formed the only plan that could possibly get him out of this fix he was in. If he remained motionless they would shoot him down like a dog and his own pistol was out of reach.

He made a lunge toward Pierre LaFarge. The big Canuck's gun roared but the suddenness of Gil's rush spoiled Pierre's aim. Then he locked with Pierre. He knew that the others would not dare shoot at him for fear of killing their leader.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Grizzly Tom had picked himself an adversary and Ollie Nevers had been awakened and he, too, was going at it, tooth and toe nail.

GIL broke free from Pierre only to make another lunge at the Frenchman. This time a knife glinted in LaFarge's hand. Gil caught his wrist on the downward thrust and twisted it until the knife dropped to the ground. They fought again much the same as they had in the saloon at Fort Winton. There was the same wild swinging and as before Gil felt Pierre weakening under his sledge hammer blows.

Finally Pierre LaFarge wilted and sank to the ground. Gil looked around. Old Grizzly Tom was stretched out on the grass, either out cold or dead, Gil

didn't know which. He didn't see the Indian that Tom had been fighting. Then he saw Ollie Nevers struggling with the third member of the raiding party. Ollie seemed to be getting the worst of it but Gil hesitated to pitch in. What the hell, he thought. That was Ollie's fight. Gil had hammered down his own foe and that was plenty. If it came to a place where Ollie couldn't go on he would help him.

Suddenly Gil saw a look of horror cross Ollie's features. Gil couldn't see, though, the other Indian creeping upon him with a raised tomahawk. But Ollie saw and the horrible thought surged through his mind that the magnificent body of Gil Traynor was about to be destroyed. That just couldn't happen.

Ollie quit his redskinned opponent and hurled himself toward Gil. He threw his small form between the big trapper and the descending tomahawk. There was a crunching of flesh and bone as the stone hatchet bit deep into the little man's shoulder. Ollie slumped while Gil watched transfixed. But he didn't grin as he watched Ollie go down. Instead his lips set in a tight grim line.

Too late he caught a movement behind him. He tried to dodge but before he could get out of the way, a rifle barrel careened off his skull and he slipped into a darkened oblivion.

When Gil returned to his senses his first sensation was the odor of burning flesh. He was in a little cabin and his head throbbed where the rifle barrel had struck him but he paid no heed to that as he turned to see where the burning smell was coming from. He was bound hand and foot and he had to roll over on his side to see the rest of the interior of the cabin. When he did his blood froze in his veins.

Ollie Nevers was laying across the room also bound but his chest was bared and his mocassins were off. Grizzly Tom was lying in a like manner a few feet from Ollie. Now Pierre LaFarge was standing over Ollie with a red hot poker in his hand. A brazier of burning coals was on the floor in the center of the room.

"For the last time, *chien,*" rasped LaFarge harshly. "Where is ze gold?"

"And for the last time, I'm telling you to go to hell," gritted Ollie.

Pierre LaFarge raised the red tipped poker and started to put it down on the little man's chest. Gil saw Ollie wince and something snapped in his brain. He tore at his bonds but all struggle was futile. "Wait," he called out weakly in a half pleading tone.

LaFarge whirled and Ollie lifted his head slightly so that he could see Gil. "Don't tell the skunk where it is," he said fiercely.

Pierre LaFarge started toward Gil, his eyes shining greedily. "So, you have come out of it," he muttered softly. "Thees will be a great pleasure. Where did you hide thees gold, you dog?" He lifted the poker.

"You can burn an' be damned," grated Gil. "But you'll never git it outa me. I'd see yuh in hell first."

"An' that is where you will be," said Pierre, "if you do not tell. Only you are wrong about seeing me 'cause I will not be there. Only these." He indicated the prone forms of Ollie and Grizzly Tom.

Gil glanced around the room. Apparently LaFarge was the only one of the renegades inside. But there were undoubtedly others near at hand. The door was closed but was unlocked as the large beam used to bolt it hung above the latch.

Pierre knelt down beside Gil's bound feet and roughly pulled his moccasins off. "Thees is what makes them talk," he grinned sneeringly. "To burn them on the bottom of the feet."

He straightened up and in that in-

stant Gil saw a chance. It was the slimmest of chances but one had to grab at anything at a time like this. With a lightning fast movement he doubled up and brought his legs back over his body. Then he uncoiled and his bare feet shot out like a catapault and caught Pierre LaFarge squarely in the middle. The big Frenchman was hurled back across the room from the force of the mighty blow. The hot poker hurtled from his hand and clattered to the floor.

LaFarge hit the door of the cabin with resounding force and slid down unconscious. As he did so the heavy bolt jarred loose from its fastening and dropped into the latch. Gil sat upright. The door was locked! If he could only get himself untied before the others could break down the door there might be some chance for them all to escape. He looked around the room for something that he might edge up against to cut the buckskin thongs. His eyes fell on the red hot poker.

He scooted himself along the floor toward it and Ollie Nevers saw him and read his purpose. "God!" he breathed. "Gil, yuh ain't goin' to—"

"It's the only way," rasped Gil.

"I'll do it," shouted Ollie.

"You will like hell," shot out Gil fiercely. "I saw it first."

OLD Grizzly Tom watched the big buckskinned trapper and for the first time since he had ever known Gil Traynor a look of admiration came into his eyes.

Gil reached the piece of hot iron and put his bound wrists to the red hot tip. A hot sizzling sound rose in the air and Gil felt the hot brand bite into his hands. But he kept on sawing the cords back and forth across it. Suddenly one of them parted and Gil kept on. LaFarge had bound those wrists tightly and there were many to cut in two.

There was a loud knock against the door and Gil knew that Pierre's henchmen had suspected something amiss when they heard the commotion inside. LaFarge, too, was beginning to stir. Gil didn't have much time left and he sawed frantically at the restraining cords. He gave no heed to the almost unbearable burning of the poker.

Finally the last thong parted and Gil swung his numbed and blistered hands free. He pounded them fiercely against the floor to restore the circulation and then hurled himself toward Pierre LaFarge and pulled the knife from the sheath at the Canuck's side.

Working feverishly Gil slashed the cords at his feet. Then he went over and in a few lightening strokes he cut the bonds that held Ollie and Grizzly Tom. They were unable to walk because of the burned soles of their feet.

Gil took two navy cap-and-ball pistols from the Frenchman and handed one each to his two companions.

"What're you goin' tuh use, boy?"

"I'll cast my lot with steel," said Gil grimly. He grasped the hunting knife with which he had cut the thongs.

They sat by the door and waited. Suddenly it gave a lurch, creaked and 'breeds and Indians poured into the room. There were at least a half dozen of them but Gil grimly resolved that it would be a fight to the finish.

He brought his knife up as the first man surged inside and the halfbreed crumpled, never to rise again. Now Gil was fighting fiercely in hand to hand combat with another dark faced man. They parried, and feinted and finally Gil's opponent bared a vital spot and Gil thrust the knife home.

He heard the concussion of the navy pistols. The acrid gunsmoke vapors filled the room and stung his nostrils. He went down fighting like a demon and when finally he downed one of the renegade Indians he suddenly knew that

the room was quiet. He turned and saw Ollie and Grizzly Tom sitting with smoke curling from their pistols. Every one of the six invaders was down.

They heard a movement and they whirled to see Pierre LaFarge sitting up, rubbing his head. But he was unarmed and was unable to do much damage that way. LaFarge got up and looked surprised at the bodies of his men on the cabin floor. Gil walked over and faced him.

"Looks like about all we do is fight each other," said Gil slowly. "This time when we do one of us isn't going to get up. I could kill you now but a buckskin man doesn't fight that way." Gil held out two knives to the big *voyageur*. "Here, take your choice."

"So, you are good with fists, you think maybe you are also good with knives," snarled LaFarge. "*Bien,* Pierre will show *l'enfant* how to fight with them."

He took the knife from Gil's hand and the two men backed off and faced each other.

SUDDENLY Pierre made a lunge but Gil parried the thrust and there was a loud clanging as the steel of the two blades met. Their hands rose high in the air as each had the other's weapon locked. Then Pierre pulled his knife around and worked it free. He brought it down in a murderous swipe but he was too anxious and the blade grazed Gil's cheek. Gil realized, in a swift thought, that he had missed death by a fraction of an inch.

Fresh anger surged within Gil as he felt the warm blood cascade down the side of his face. Before Pierre could recover himself after that downward thrust at Gil's head, Gil rushed in at the opening. His arm arced up and fell and the knife buried itself in Pierre LaFarge's chest, going to the hilt. LaFarge wobbled for a moment and then slumped to the floor.

Gil turned and walked slowly back to the place where Ollie Nevers and Grizzly Tom were sitting. His shoulders were slightly drooped and there was none of the old arrogance that had always followed his former fights.

"Well, that's that," he muttered.

"That's the best danged fight I ever saw yuh in, boy," cackled old Grizzly Tom. "You're all right, I tell yuh."

"That was a great thing yuh did, Gil," said Ollie. "Givin' him a chance like that. It takes a man to do that."

"Perhaps you're right, Ollie," said Gil slowly. "But if I am a man it's because it took a better man to show me the way."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Quick Trigger Western Novels Magazine, Published Quarterly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1937

State of New York, } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Martin Goodman, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the Quick Trigger Western Novels Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Martin Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, New York. Editor, Martin Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, New York. Managing Editor, Martin Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, New York. Business Manager, Martin Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, New York.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.)

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3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is..... (This information is required from daily publications only.)

MARTIN GOODMAN, Publisher.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 11th day of October, 1937.

MAURICE COYNE.

[SEAL] (My commission expires March 30, 1938.)

New York Co. Clerk No. 500.

Yellow River Gets a Sheriff

by
ORLANDO RIGONI

Author of "Powdersmoke Peace Parley," etc.

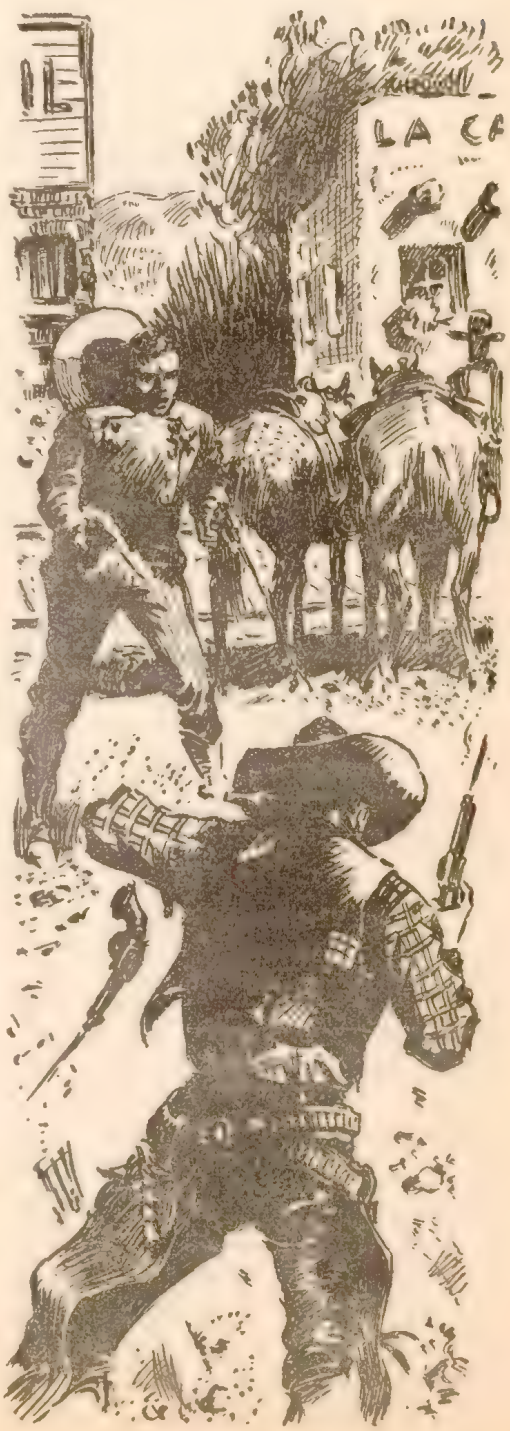
THERE was nothing startling about Jake Alstop as he rode down into the great bowl of the Yellow River Valley. He might have been a tramp cowpoke, rustling for a ten day job, but he wasn't. His clothes were neat, though well-worn. There was a businesslike appearance about his riding gear, and the knurling on the

walnut butt of the big gun, tied down at his thigh, was worn smooth with use.

Jake neither dallied nor hurried. The great gray horse, that blended with dust and sage, covered the miles with a tireless half trot.

Jake looked like a man with a grim job to do, and he was. His thin lips were compressed and his lean fingers toyed with the hard object in the pocket of his flannel shirt. That object was a brass star.

He reined around a sharp turn into the tortuous trail, and started across a green meadow. The gray horse threw his head up in warning. Jake stiffened. Half way across the meadow



When Jake Alstop moseyed into Yellow River Valley he would likely have been taken for nothing more than a tramp cowpoke—if he hadn't met up with a snarling, bushwhacking bully, and a beautiful golden-haired girl!

was a group of horsemen. Facing them, like an animal at bay, was another rider.

Jake clucked to the powerful horse, and felt instinctively of his gun. Maybe the job—the tough bit of lawin' that old Sheriff Horn had told him about, was ready to begin.

He rode up to the group, just in time to hear the leader of the men threatening the rider who faced them defiantly. The rider was small. With a start of surprise, Jake realized the lone rider was a girl.

That first full look at her startled him like a bright light. She looked all golden, and tan, and beautiful. Her small face was tense and angry, and a brave light sparked from her blue eyes. She wore soft, expensive leather, fancy boots, and the horse she sat was one of the most splendid animals Jake had ever seen.

The man threatening the girl was big, loose-jointed, and his face had the sagging look of a man who had just lost a lot of fat. He was saying to the girl, in a snarling, bullying voice:

"We want yore paw, Sally. If yuh won't tell us where at he's hid out, we'll throw yuh into jail in his stead. Yore obstructin' the course of justice. . . ."

"Justice!" she flared angrily. "What do you know of justice, Caleb Vance?"

THE man's flat nose twitched and his eyes frowned. "This jabberin' an' accusin' won't get you no place—no place atall, Sally. We want . . ."

Jake pulled rein ten yards from the men and girl. He said, softly, "What seems to be the trouble here, friends?"

A little half-pint, with a snag tooth and greasy whiskers, barked in a deep booming voice that sounded funny coming from one so small. "Mebbe it's none o' your business, hombre."

Vance was continually twirling a short piece of rope in his hand, and now he flipped the rope at the half-pint. "Keep a curb on yore tongue, Hasset. The gent asked a civil question." Then Vance turned to Jake. "We're the citizen's committee from Jericho an' we mean to enforce law an' order as best we can. We're lookin' for the gal's paw, who robbed the Jericho Stockmen's Bank twice in the past six months."

"You right certain you're barkin' up the right tree, Vance?" Jake Alstop asked in the same even voice. "Seems like if the old gent robbed the bank before, you would've done something to stop him from repeatin' the trick."

Vance said in his heavy voice, "We couldn't pin the first thievin' on him. No witnesses. He denies the whole shebang. But Job Orcutt ain't got no visible means of support, yet he lives right handy like. His few acres of scraggy land, an' his handful o' lean critters ain't buyin' fine horses, nor fine clothes for his gal to sport around."

Jake shifted in the saddle, cocked one lean leg across the horn. "That's first rate evidence, Vance. Reckon you men can go home peaceable. I'll take over this job of lawin'."

Vance's eyes seemed to recede into his flabby face. The men with him, drew closer about him. It wasn't a pronounced movement, just a shuffling of position that brought them into a tight knot.

"They ain't no law down thisaway, but what the Citizen's Committee makes, stranger. First off, I might ask you who yuh are?"

Jake fished the bright brass star from his pocket, and let it glow dully in his upturned hand. "I'm Deputy Jake Alstop. Sheriff Horn, at the county seat, has been gettin' disquietin' rumors from Yellow River. He sent me down to have a look-see."

Jake was regarding the group of grizzled men closely. He expected to find opposition from the start, so

Vance's next words startled him. Vance was plainly on guard. He glowered at his saddle mates before he answered Jake. Then he said with an oiliness in his heavy voice that made it more displeasing:

"Reckon we're right proud to have yuh with us, Alstop. We been needin' a law officer with credentials for some time. If they's anything we can do to help yuh, say the word."

"You can go home," Jake told them shortly. "Go home and let this girl alone. If her dad is rompin' loose outside the law corral, I'll rope an' dally him personal."

For a moment the men sat there, as though awaiting orders from Vance. Vance grinned, and the action drew his thick lips back off his crooked teeth. There seemed to be no expression that could improve Vance's gross features.

"Sure, we'll go back. We was just poundin' the law trail accordin' to our rights. We ain't up much on technicalities. We just pick our man, an' hound him. . . ."

The girl, who had been regarding Jake with shrewd eyes and tight lips, broke in, "Hound, is the right word, Caleb Vance. If you keep on hounding my dad, he'll have to kill you!"

Jake stared at the girl. "Them's hard words, Miss, an' they don't help the situation out atall. The law doesn't hound innocent folks. If your dad can explain. . . ."

Hasset, the greasy bearded gent, cried with sudden temper, "Job Orcutt could explain plenty—so could his gal, there, but neither will Sally Orcutt talk. Reckon we just gotta keep addin' up the right answer like we been doin'. Me? I'd horsewhip the truth outta the filly."

Vance scowled at the little man. "Hold yore tongue, Hasset! I reckon we'll traipse back to town like Alstop said. We got a real lawman here now, an' he gets first crack at the lawbreakers."

Hasset grumbled in his beard. The other men said nothing. Jake was a little uneasy. He had expected a show of defiance from Vance. Vance had the eye of a schemer and the way of a gunhandy. His compliance with Jake's request was too willing to be genuine.

"Thanks, Vance," Jake said softly. "I reckon it'll make things easier all around if you take that attitude."

"We'll be right willin' to parley with yuh when you come into Jericho, Alstop. Look me up at Red Looper's."

WITH that, the Citizen's committee rode away in a cloud of dust, Hasset still mumbling in his greasy beard.

Jake faced the girl. She was sitting the magnificent horse like a statue—a marble statue with alluring features, and the slim, rounded form of youth. But there was swift, pulsing life in the marble. Twin spots of anger burned in her cheeks and her brave eyes stared without flinching, full into Jake's own.

"Reckon, ma'am," Jake said softly, "they won't be botherin' you an' your dad no more."

Sally laughed, a harsh, brittle laugh without any humor in it. "So Sheriff Horn has sent a fool to clean up the Yellow River Valley," she said bitterly. "You certainly don't believe all that Vance said, do you?"

Jake flushed at her taunt, but he forced the anger back. He had long ago learned to control his temper. "Reckon I believe most of it, ma'am. I ain't sayin', mind you, that Vance meant what he said, but I reckon most of it is goin' to come true."

"A braggart, as well as a fool," Sally said in her throaty voice.

Jake's eyes narrowed. "You might at least thank me for hornin' in when I did. You couldn't go on fightin' them

hombres to a finish and expect to come out whole leather."

"I'm not afraid of them," she said fiercely. "What difference does it make if I fight them, or I fight you?"

"I haven't come to fight with you, Sally. . . ."

"Miss Orcutt, please. . . ."

"I say I haven't come to fight with you, Sally," Jake went on earnestly.

"But you will fight with me," she stated definitely. "You'll ask me questions, and I won't have any answers. You'll try to make me talk, because you think it's your duty. You'll snoop around and spy on me and my father. You'll threaten us and warn us and fight with us. I don't want your protection, thanks!"

With that, she whirled her horse, and headed toward the round ball of the setting sun. For a moment, Jake stood there feeling as though he had been slapped. His eyes drank in the beautiful picture of that magnificent horse, and the beautiful, brave girl that rode him. As they disappeared around a bend in the trail, Jake sighed.

He certainly hadn't made a very favorable impression upon her. What could she tell him, if she would? What could she know of the reported killings, and robberies that had been going on in the valley? In spite of his attempt to be agreeable, Caleb Vance was scarcely a man to be trusted. Jake shrugged. He had come expecting trouble, and it looked as though he might get it.

CHAPTER II

Welcome

IT was dusk when Jake rode warily into Jericho. He rode with his gun handy, and his eyes staring at the shadows in the darkened doorways. He didn't know what kind of a welcome Vance had prepared for him. If they didn't want him, they could stage one swift gunfight and kill him off before he got even as far as Red Looper's. He reached the big building with Looper's name sprawled across the front, and dismounted. Dirt-tying his horse, he pushed into the saloon.

Jake paused inside the door, blinking the bright lights out of his eyes. A line of men was bellied up to the bar. Vance was there, and Hasset. Vance saw Jake, and roared his welcome.

"Here's the deputy now, men. Reckon things'll be lookin' up in Jericho. Step up, son, an' wet down the dust in yore throat. Right hot trail yuh been ridin' an' a mite dusty this season."

Jake grinned, and walked up to the bar with a slow, gliding movement that told of a man who held his body in perfect control. "Reckon' I'll have that drink, Vance. Hard likker, straight."

Vance turned to the man next to him, a very tall man with showy clothes, and a lean, bony face that had the appearance of having been shaved and polished but a moment before. The man was constantly flipping a gold coin in his smooth, long fingers.

"Corrigan," Vance boomed, "meet up with the law—genuine."

Corrigan put out a hand as soft as a girl's. "Right glad to meet you, lad. I've got reasons for wantin' law in Yellow River. I've got the biggest stake to lose. My fat stuff ain't been on their feed lately. Night raids—little thievin's what add up into big money when they come regular." Corrigan laughed loudly, too loudly, as though there was humor in the statement, though Jake couldn't find any.

Jake took Corrigan's hand. "I hope to be able to stop the rustlin' an' killin' that's been going on down here, Corrigan, but I might need your help."

"Right proud to lend a hand," Corrigan said heartily. "Meet up with Banker Holbrook here, Alstop. He's been gettin' gray hairs lately, since the bank has been busted into."

Jake turned to look at a medium sized, square built man with gray-streaked hair. Holbrook was dressed in black frock coat, white shirt with soft, flowing tie. He wore thick lensed glasses that made his eyes look big and lidless, like red-veined marbles.

"I hope I can get an honest night's sleep with a real lawman on the job," Holbrook said in a flat, monotonous voice. "It's gettin' so honest folks won't put their money in the bank no more."

Vance explained, "I got all the boys here to meet you, Alstop. Thought we could sort o' talk things over and put you on the right track. Let's drink up, an' adjourn to the back room. What say?"

They all nodded assent, and drained their glasses. Vance and Holbrook led the way, and Corrigan was last, with Hasset and Jake ahead of him. As he neared the door of the back room, Jake heard a man call him aside. The man was fat with a genial face. A long mustache drooped almost to the man's chin.

Jake stepped over. The man said in a husky whisper. "They's somethin' you oughta know, sheriff. If you got time. . . ."

Jake looked around. He saw Corrigan scowl and go back to the bar to talk with the hulking man at the bar. Jake turned to the man at his side.

"I'll see you later, Mister. Thanks." Then he went into the back room with the others. He sat on a chair tilted against the wall so that all of the men would be in front of him. Corrigan came in and closed the door.

Corrigan started the parley and the others gave him first say. "The bank, here, is a sort of community affair, Alstop, run by the ranchers with Holbrook as manager. When the bank's robbed, the ranchers lose, and they've lost more than they can stand. I'm the heaviest depositor, and I've lost more than I can afford. But we've all lost some."

"An' they was that killin' of Hoppy Smith when he was robbed of the Bar-Bar-X payroll," Vance grumbled.

"An' the rustlin' of Widow Larson's small herd. Only a skunk would steal from a widow. Left her in poverty," Holbrook said flatly.

"Any suspects?" Jake asked slowly, rolling a twirly.

"Sure—Job Orcutt—he done it—he done them things. . . ." Hasset began in his voice that was too big for him.

"Shut up, Hasset," Vance growled. "Yuh're always droolin' off at the mouth. But I reckon Job is the chief suspect. Always spendin' money, never earnin' any. He's got the finest horses on the Yellow River. Big price stuff he's had shipped in. He's nuts on horses."

"Lovin' horses don't make a man a criminal," Jake opined softly.

CORRIGAN stopped flipping his coin, and slapped it hard on the table. "No, it don't," he said grimly, "but neither does it make him honest. Where does he get the money he spends if he don't steal it?"

"I can't say," Jake shrugged.

His calmness seemed to upset Vance. Vance rocked on his thick legs, and his voice held that surly harshness when he spoke. "Yuh don't seem very excited about these things, Alstop, but we are. We've got to live with them. We've give yuh the lowdown. What're yuh goin tuh do?"

Jake grinned at them. "Mebbe I'll buy me a horse," he said evenly.

Corrigan gave his coin an impatient flip. "This ain't no time for foolery,

sheriff. It don't take much addin' to figure your way to the right man for a law trial. If Job Orcutt is so damned innocent, whyn't he come forward and explain about his mysterious trips out o' Yellow River? Why'nt he tell us the wherefrom comes his money? This is a hard country, Alstop, an' we been handlin' thataway. We figure you'll do well to do the same."

Jake's jaw tightened. He didn't intend to be bossed, yet he wanted to avoid any argument at this early date. "Reckon you're right, Corrigan. But I still figure I might buy me a horse."

At that moment, there was a commotion out front. The sound of boots thudding across the floor. Angry voices. A gun blasting like caged thunder.

Jake slammed his tipped chair down and leaped to his long legs. The easy calmness was gone from his body. It seemed hard and tense like a coiled spring.

Corrigan laughed his easy, senseless laugh. "Don't get boogered up, sheriff. Just the boys' idea of fun."

"It's not my idea of fun," Jake said grimly and legged into the barroom with the others trailing.

Smoke was swirling to the ceiling of the room. In the middle of the floor stood the hulking form of Morty Hansen, Corrigan's foreman. Near Hansen was another grizzled-faced rider, cursing volubly and holding a bloody hand. Facing Hansen was the long mustached man who had whispered the warning to Jake.

Jake read the signs swiftly. Gunfight. But it was more than a casual gunthrowing. It was a putup job to get rid of the man who had whispered to Jake on the way into the back room. Jake knew, now, why Corrigan had gone back to the bar before going into the back room.

Jake felt the eyes of the men in the room sizing him up. Now was the time to show his brand of law. "Put up your guns," he said softly, yet the words carried across the room.

Hansen snapped. "Keep outta this, Lawbadge! The runt, there, picked the fight, drew on Veets when he wasn't expectin' it. I aim to give him a fair trial right down to the coroner's reckonin'."

Jake didn't hesitate. He walked quietly over to the little man. "I'm arresting you, mister, for disturbin' the peace," he said calmly.

Jake put a hand to the little fellow's gunarm, preventing him from accepting Hansen's challenge. Jake was sideways to Hansen, and in direct line of fire should Hansen draw. The men in the room watched tensely, conscious of the fact that Jake was putting himself in danger purposely. Here was a chance to get rid of the Lawbadge . . .

Hansen slapped for his gun. But a funny thing happened. Nobody saw Jake draw—that is there seemed to be no movement of his arm, yet his gun leaped out, roared! Hansen stiffened as the gun was blasted from his hand. He held his hand out in front of him as though he was unable to drop it and his eyes seemed to pop out a little.

Jake could almost feel the respect in the faces of the men about the room. He kept his gun up, herded the little man toward Hansen. Hansen fumbled at a silver ornament on his watch chain.

"I reckon you're goin' along, Hansen," Jake said slowly.

Hansen smirked, still unable to grasp the fact that he had been bested in a draw. His gunswift was his one and only asset and he had been robbed of it before all those men. "You're a damned fool, Lawbadge. They ain't no jail can hold me."

Jake herded them to the jail, such as it was, followed by an excited, speculating throng. He locked them both in one cell and walked grimly back

to the crowded office. Corrigan was in the front of the crowd, with Holbrook and Vance at his side.

"RECKON yore a makin' a mistake, sheriff," Corrigan said earnestly, flipping his coin. "The boys are a little wild, they got to let off steam now and then, but they ain't criminal. You're wastin' too much time on petty offenders when there's bigger problems."

"I'll be the judge of that," Jake said.

"That man's my foreman," Holbrook insisted. "I need him. We've got a justice of the peace here, never has much work to do, but you can arrange a trial. I'll vouch for Hansen in the meantime. I'll go his bail."

Jake pondered for a moment. He knew he didn't have the power of a court, but if Corrigan meant to imply that he had, he'd let the thing go like that. "The bail will be five thousand dollars," Jake stated calmly.

Corrigan's too tall body seemed to twitch. "Rather steep, ain't it, sheriff."

"Not for attempted murder."

Corrigan's polished face seemed to harden like rock. "I'll give you my I. O. U."

"Can't accept nothin' but cash," Jake informed him without batting an eye.

Corrigan flushed angrily, but he held his voice even. He jerked his head at Banker Holbrook in the frock coat. "Get the money, Holbrook."

Jake decided that Corrigan must be quite a power in Yellow River, from the way he gave orders. To buck him hard meant to stir up trouble, but Jake had come to Yellow River expecting trouble. Why delay the issue?

When the money had been paid and the crowd had gone, taking Hansen with them, Jake went to the little man in the cell.

"Frameup?" he asked cryptically, referring to the fight.

THE other nodded. "Yeah. I made the mistake of talkin' to yuh in public, Alstop. My name's Stickney. Vance an' Corrigan figured to take good care of yuh when yuh showed up here because they was afraid if they let you run loose you'd learn too much."

"Thanks, Stickney, for the advice. I figured it thataway myself. What do you know about Job Orcutt and his girl Sally?"

Stickney shrugged and tugged at his long mustache that drooped almost to his chin. "Not much. The old coot makes trips for days at a time, he's got fine hosses an' a tight wire place. But only a fool would figure him in on the thievin' an' killin' around here. Corrigan don't really believe Orcutt had a hand in the bank robberies, but he wants to make Orcutt talk for some reason."

"Orcutt won't talk?"

Stickney shook his head. He lowered his voice. "If I was you, sheriff, I'd have a look at the books of the bank. You've got the authority. Corrigan, an' Vance, an' three-four others. . . ."

Stickney got no farther. There was a little clink of metal against metal. Jake stiffened and looked at the barred window. The round eye of a gunbarrel was staring at him. Before he could move or cry a warning, the gun blasted.

The sound of the shot filled the little room with a terrible burst of sound. Jake saw Stickney fall limply, without an outcry. Blood was gushing from a hole in the back of his head. In the same split second, Jake threw himself against the wall under the gun, just as it roared again. The second slug buried itself in the wall just at the spot where Jake had been.

Jake leaped for the cell door. He raced through the office and ran outside.

There was no one in back of the jail, not even the sound of a retreating

horse. The darkness was like a wall. Jake realized that the killer might be lurking near to get another shot at him. He crouched against the wall, and crept back to the office. He removed the five thousand dollars from his pocket, and locked it in the old safe. Swiftly he extinguished the light.

He went back to the cell. For a moment he stood in the shadows, looking into the dimly lighted cell at the sprawled form of Stickney. That wanton murder had placed a new, grim menace alongside of those he already faced. He put out the light in the cell and leaped back into the shadows.

HE went down to the still lively saloon run by Looper, to put his horse away. Corrigan met him in the pool of light on the walk.

"I had your horse taken care of, Alstop," he said with his smooth voice.

"Thanks," Jake said shortly.

"Thought I heard a shot up at the jail," Corrigan hazarded.

"I just shot a rat in the jail office," Jake lied. He could see the surprise in Corrigan's face. "Where's Hansen, your foreman?"

Corrigan jerked his head at the saloon door. "Inside. Has been ever since he come back from the jail. Why?"

"Nothing," Jake said. "I'll be turning in. Goodnight, Corrigan."

"I can make room for you, sheriff, until you get settled proper," Corrigan offered.

"I'll make out," Jake refused the offer. He didn't say where he was going to sleep. He was still remembering that shooting at the jail and he wasn't taking any chances. He got his horse and rode out of town by the back way, camping near the river where there was plenty of grass for his horse.

In the morning he returned to Jericho to superintend Stickney's burial. The town was buzzing with the murder. Everybody was talking about it, except Jake.

Jake's silence seemed to worry Corrigan and Vance. Corrigan told him flatly, "You're a damned funny hombre, sheriff. Here is a killin' right under your nose, yet you seem to take no cognizance of it, whilst a innocent gun-slingin' raises yore hair proper. Frankly, I don't believe you're the right sort of deputy for this job. What we need is a excitable Lawbadge who can sling a gun easy."

"Corrigan, you didn't get me through no mail order house," Jake said shortly, his dark eyes squinted. "I come as I am. I ain't blowin' no horns, and don't figure to turn the range over in one night."

"About this Stickney killin'," Corrigan went on smoothly, "here's a piece of evidence one of my men picked up back o' the jail. If you can match that, you've got your man."

Jake took the silver ornament that had evidently been lost from a saddle. "I'll keep it, Corrigan. Thanks." Jake had seen that ornament before.

"What are you goin' to do?"

"Buy that horse I been talkin' about."

With that, Jake turned his horse and rode away. He had a good idea of the location of Orcutt's ranch and he headed that way. As he left the town, the vision of Sally rose up before him. After the grim night he had been through, the fresh, young beauty of her seemed more alluring than ever. He dreamed about her all the way to the ranch, eager to see her again.

He remembered her words, too, and he knew he wouldn't be very welcome at the Orcutt's. But he had to see them, had to get them into his confidence and learn what it was Corrigan wanted to know about old Job's absences.

CHAPTER III

Not Welcome

It was late when he arrived at the ranch. It was situated in the foothills at the bottom of the Mormon Mountains. The main part of the ranch was in a shallow draw that started at the river and disappeared into the thick growth of trees half way up the mountain.

For the most part, the ranch was as Vance had described it—scraggle land. However, there was one forty that was lush with alfalfa knee high to a horse. That forty was fenced with net. Wire came high in the Yellow River country, but net wire was a luxury on any range.

Within the fence, were horses—horses such as Jake had never before seen. Blooded stock. Long legs, lean barrels. Heads thrown up proudly and manes blowing in the wind. Jake felt a thrill go through him at the sight of them.

He rode to the gate at the entrance to the lane, and halted. A sign on the post proclaimed cryptically:

NOTICE!
Visitors enter at their own risk.

Jake smiled a little, reached down and opened the gate without dismounting and rode in. The place was small, but neat. As he passed the blacksmith shop, built against a low knoll, he was startled to see the girl watching him quietly from a tree, near the well.

Jake regained his composure and dismounted by the trough at the side of the well. "Reckon you—you startled me a little, Sally," he said in a voice made breathless by the shock of her beauty.

"What do you want—have you begun your snooping?" Her voice was flat.

Jake flushed. "I've come to buy a horse," he countered bluntly.

She bit her lip and her blue eyes were like ice, and Jake noticed the gun worn at her hip, heavier than a woman usually carried. A forty-five.

"We don't sell horses," she said steadily.

Jake regarded her shrewdly. "You've got to make a living. I don't see much else to sell hereabouts."

"We do well enough," she held the same even tone.

"Come on now, Sally, I reckon you're a mite too beautiful to be all madded up like that. If you're selling horses I'd like to buy the big black. What is he worth?"

"If we were selling horses, he'd be worth five hundred dollars. But we're not selling horses, and you haven't come here to buy. Why don't you have your say, and get out?"

Jake felt the anger rising to his face, and fought it back. "Not a friendly greeting, Sally. All right, I'll have my say. Corrigan's got something against your dad. He's trying to hook him up with the bank robberies in Jericho."

"And aren't you helping him?" she asked with a slight note of sarcasm.

Jake frowned. It was evident the girl was wrought up about something. She wasn't the kind to deliberately turn people against her. "I don't rightly know. Fact is, I don't figure your dad had anything to do with them crimes. Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"When will he be home?"

"I don't know that, either," she insisted. "All your questions won't get you anyplace. I haven't got any answers. All we want is to be left alone."

Jake shrugged. "A ranch like this with net-wire pasture an' blooded horses what ain't for sale, has got to come from someplace. They don't just happen."

She said tightly, "It's nobody's business where it came from. We got it honestly."

"You can't blame them for addin' two an' two and gettin' four, Sally. Money's been stole. Your dad makes a better showin' than most of the other ranchers except Corrigan an' Vance, mebbe, yet your dad ain't got no money crop. If you'll only trust me. . . ."

"There's nobody I'd trust in Yellow River Valley, especially not a stranger who is greeted with eager, open arms. Won't you please go away?" There was desperation in her voice.

Jake regarded her silently for a full minute, and a little pity touched his heart, at the brave picture she made. Whatever it was she was hiding, he didn't know, but it must be hard for her to go on fighting prying tongues. . . .

"Could I have a bite to eat before I go back?" Jake asked, trying a new line of attack.

SALLY eyed him shrewdly, guessing at his purpose. "If you're starving, I guess I can find some bread and jam."

Jake felt a flush of anger at her cold hospitality, and said tartly, "Reckon I'm not hungry enough, after all, to eat Orcutt grub. I can make out 'til I get back to Jericho. Right pleasant visit we had, Sally."

It was Sally's turn to flush. He saw the ice melt from her eyes and a strange light came there, as though something within her was crying for companionship. But she didn't relent.

"Goodby," she said tightly. "I imagine that the next time you'll come skulking in the dark, like a coyote."

Jake's jaw bulged as he turned away. He was afraid to say the words rushing to his lips. He rode out of the lane into a juniper thicket, out of sight of the house. There he dismounted, settled himself against a tree while his horse nipped at the green grass. Jake resolved to have it out with old Job Orcutt. The old man would have to come home sometime.

After dark, Jake tied his horse at the entrance to the lane, and crept back into the yard on foot. He hunkered down by the woodpile and waited for a long time. The chill night air cramped his lean legs. There was a light in the house, and he could see Sally's shadow moving across the drawn shades. Grimly, he remembered her words: "You'll come skulking back in the dark, like a coyote."

It was sometime after midnight, when the clack of disturbed gravel startled him. A lone rider was coming down the draw from the Mormon Mountains. As the rider drew into the yard, he gave a soft whistle. The girl came from the house with a lighted lantern.

In the light of the lantern, Jake saw Job Orcutt. He was a powerfully-built man, gray, with a face like seamed granite. *He carried a small pouch in his hand* as he dismounted from a big, powerful horse.

The girl said something to Job, and he answered in a gruff, tired voice, "She's about the same, lass. If we can keep the wolves out for a few more weeks, she'll be over an' done with, I reckon."

Quietly, Jake uncoiled his long body, and legged across the yard. Orcutt saw him, and jerked erect. He seemed to lose his weariness instantly. He was watchful, on guard.

"What d'yuh mean, hombre, prowlin' about here in the night? Yuh read the sign back yonder. Take the consequences!"

Orcutt's hand filled with gleaming metal. It was a smooth draw, yet Jake knew he could have beaten it by the split second that spells life or death.

Jake didn't draw. He stood fixed, a little low on his legs.

"Put up your gun, Orcutt!" he said shortly.

"Get out o' here—don't come a step closer or I'll drill yuh. I've been driven far enough by snoopers, an'. . . ."

Jake didn't turn. Resolutely, he took a step nearer to the old man. The gun steadied.

Sally threw herself before the gun. "No, dad, not that!" she pleaded. She pushed the gun aside as it blasted.

Jake hurled himself at Orcutt, grasped the old man's wrist and twisted the gun loose. "You're takin' the wrong way, Orcutt," Jake said stiffly. "I got the statutes back o' me. Reckon I can help you if you're on the square."

Sally said with cutting sarcasm, "so you've come back like I said, skulking in the dark."

"I got nothin' to say to you, or the hellions what sent you," Job growled.

"I came of my own free will, Orcutt," Jake insisted. "I believe you're buckin' boogers that don't exist. If we can get the straight of the thing, I might be able to work out a sensible plan. . . ."

Jake didn't finish his talk. A slight noise disturbed him from the direction of the trough by the well. He stiffened, lowered his voice and moved close so the girl and man could hear him.

"There's somebody in the yard. Move natural like toward the house."

"And you?" the girl gasped. The anger was gone from her voice. It was filled only with concern and Jake felt a thrill at it.

"I'll have it out with them. Get out of the way."

BEFORE any of them could move a streak of fire roared from the direction of the trough. Job Orcutt was spun around as the slug struck him. He didn't fall at once, but Jake shoved him down, cried at the girl to hit dirt.

At the same instant, a shadow leaped from behind the trough. Raced across the yard. Jake snatched out his gun and fired. The shadow stumbled, lunged up. Jake raced after it, but he was too far behind. The shadow leaped to the back of a horse hidden in the shadow of the barn, and pounded out the lower end of the ranch yard.

Jake didn't follow, for he was on foot and a belated chase in the dark would be futile. He went back to tend to the old man. Job Orcutt was bad hit, and had lost consciousness. Sally was kneeling over him, sobbing softly, "Dad—oh, Dad—can it be worth all this?"

Jake lifted the girl gently to her feet. The touch of her exhilarated him like heady wine. The lantern had gone out, and he told her to light it. In the light of the lantern, Jake saw the pouch where Job had dropped it. The top come open, and a golden stream had poured from the mouth.

The girl scooped it up, and glared at him defiantly. Jake said nothing, but he thought plenty. Together, they got the old man in the house. While Sally bravely finished cleaning and binding his wound, Jake went out to care for the horse Job had ridden.

Jake had the lantern with him, and as he pulled the saddle from the horse's wet back, he was startled by the silver ornament that gleamed from the rosette at the side of the bulge. His eyes squinted. The ornament on the opposite side was missing and Jake had it in his pocket. It was the one Corrigan had claimed was picked up behind the jail.

Back in the kitchen, Sally faced Jake. "They—they meant to kill him, Jake."

Jake had never thought much of his name, but the way she said it, it was right beautiful. "Yes," he nodded, "and they was careful to pull the play

whilst I was here. Figure to lay the shootin' on me, I reckon."

"They can't do that!" Sally cried in alarm. "I saw it all, I'd tell what happened. We owe you that much."

Jake shook his head. "No you wouldn't. If you tried to tell them anything, you'd have to tell everything."

"I—I can't do that," she said with the old desperation, "I've given my promise."

Jake didn't press her any more, and she was grateful for that. "Reckon I'll be goin'," Jake said shortly. "I'll send out the doctor, Sally."

CHAPTER IV

Jail Thieves

JAKE rode swiftly back toward Jericho. He slept in his old camp near the river, and went to the jail at sunup. As he entered the jail office, he stopped dead in the doorway. The safe was standing partly open. Swiftly, he strode across the room and flung the door wide. He cursed softly. The five thousand dollars of bail money was gone!

Jake smiled savagely. Corrigan was slick all right. He had Harris free, and he had the bail money back, and Jake would have to make good on the five thousand dollars. Things were stacking up against him in short order.

Jake went grimly down to the only eating house and ordered breakfast. From the window, he could see the street. Looper's was always open, and he saw some bleary-eyed gents stumbling into the place for a morning eye-opener. He saw a man called Soapy, going in with the others. Soapy carried a newly bandaged arm in a sling. Jake frowned. He had hit the prowler the night before. . . .

Vance and Corrigan came in for breakfast. Corrigan greeted Jake boisterously.

"Just heerd that Job Orcutt was shot last night, sheriff. We oughta get a statement from him afore he dies, don't you reckon?"

Jake eyed Corrigan coldly, "He isn't going to die."

"You was there?" Vance grunted, his flabby face gray with morning chill.

"I was there."

"Did you get any word outta the old coot?" Corrigan asked, flipping his coin to hide his eagerness.

"Nary a worthwhile word."

"And so yuh shot him?" Vance growled.

Jake's jaw bulged. "That's a lie, Vance. I can put my hand on the man who shot him, and on the man who sent the killer there."

Corrigan scowled. "You're too much on the prod to be a fair lawman, Alstop. Pickin' fights with the wrong parties."

"I'm trying to avoid fights that have no meaning, Corrigan," Jake said stiffly, "but I'm not used to being called a murderer."

Corrigan dragged in his breath and tapped his coin on the table. "All right, Alstop, you want trouble. You'll get it aplenty. The jail was robbed last night."

Jake eyed Corrigan for a moment before he spoke. His lips curved in a faint smile that made Corrigan's frown deepen. "For an honest citizen, Corrigan, you're damned well posted on the law breaks."

"Why shouldn't I be?" Corrigan snapped. "It was my money that was stole. I expect it back when I deliver Hansen for trial."

Jake's smile broadened, and it angered Corrigan. "What's so damned funny, sheriff?" Corrigan asked.

"I was just thinkin'," Jake shrugged. He rose to his feet and started toward

the door. "This seems to be a case of some gent havin' his cake, and eatin' it, too. It's likely to be damned bitter cake afore it's digested."

Leaving Corrigan to stare after him, Jake went out into the street. Men were about, now, and Jake could feel their unfriendly eyes upon him. Men conversed in low tones and Jake knew they were talking about him. Perhaps the honest folks were fed up with the grim events of the few days, and Jake didn't blame them. Corrigan's men and Vance's men were unfriendly because the coming of law might cost them their gun jobs. Jake told himself fiercely that he'd have to bring things to head pronto, but it would be a hard thing to do without getting Job Orcutt to talk.

Jake went to Doc Randall's, and found him just getting washed up for breakfast. The Doc looked tired and sleepy.

"Job Orcutt needs you bad, Doc," Jake told him bluntly. "He's been bandaged up proper."

Randall nodded. "I was figuring on going out there. Heard about the shootin'. I would have gone before this, but Soapy come in near morning with a bad arm. Claimed to have got bested in a gundraw."

Jake said earnestly, "I believe you'll back the law, Doc. I shot Soapy myself after he shot Job. I'm sure it was him. They've already tried to blame the shootin' of Job on me, but it won't stick. I've got things pretty well figured out in my head, Doc, and I'm about ready to spring the law trap. Will the honest folks of Yellow River Valley back me up?"

THE Doc shrugged. "They might if you could prove a law case against the proper people. I don't mind sayin' that even the honest folks is a little puzzled and suspicious with Job Orcutt."

"I aim to prove a case against the right people," Jake said grimly, slapping his hand upon the bench. "It's goin' to be a mite tough without Job Orcutt's testimony, but he's in no condition to talk, an' his girl has promised not to."

"That gal's one in a million, Alstop," the Doc said firmly. "Job has no right draggin' her into any scheme he's got. She loves him enough to die for him. Reckon if she promised, all hell couldn't pry the right words outta her mouth."

"That's what I figure, so I'll have to go it alone," Jake said slowly.

"Who're the suspects?"

"Corrigan an' Vance, mostly."

The Doc frowned. "They're men with a strong background, Alstop. If you try an' touch 'em, it'll mean trouble —plenty trouble. It might end up in a gunslingin' an' we won't have no more deputy. The honest folks won't buck Corrigan unless you got him dead certain."

Jake sighed. "It's my job, after all, Doc. I aim to do it as well as I can. Tell Sally hello for me, an' make her mad," he grinned and left the place.

It was just after bank opening time, and Jake went up the back street to the rear door of the bank. He slipped in without signalling, and found Banker Holbrook and his assistant alone. The assistant was getting some cash from the vault, and Holbrook was working on the ledgers at a high desk in the corner.

Holbrook looked up sharply, and seeing Jake, slipped one of the small books into his pocket. "What do you want, Alstop?" he asked flatly, his eyes looking like white balls behind his heavy glasses.

"I reckon I'll have a look at them books, Holbrook," Jake said casually. He noticed that Holbrook had no visible gun, but he kept a sharp lookout. Holbrook's kind usually carried a hideout.

Holbrook was nervous, and showed it. "You—you can't do that, Alstop."

"I've got the authority. I want to check up on some angles of the thievin's. . . ."

"You can't see the books," Holbrook insisted. "I'm responsible for the bank property."

Jake walked slowly toward the tall desk. Holbrook was sliding his hand under his coat.

"Drop that gun!" Jake snapped.

Holbrook hesitated. Jake leaped at him. "Drop that gun!" Jake flashed his own weapon. Holbrook let the little gun dribble from his fingers and it clacked on the floor.

"Get Corrigan!" Holbrook cried at the startled assistant, "go get him!"

Jake smiled grimly. "Corrigan will be a minute too late, Holbrook. Give me the book in your pocket."

Holbrook didn't move. Swiftly, Jake removed the book himself and marched Holbrook to the vault. He shut the heavy door and just turned the combination knob off the number so he could open it later. Then he set feverishly to work checking the books.

They were simple, single-entry books. Jake turned back to about the dates of the bank robberies. He checked some figures with entries in the little book, clucked to himself with satisfaction. One entry had been made in the little secret book that morning, and Jake grinned as he read it.

Suddenly, he was warned by the clicking of the doorlatch. He spun around to face Corrigan and his foreman, Harris, who had come back with the assistant. Corrigan's face was tight and grim. His eyes glowed like coals, and the hand that usually flipped the gold coin was near his gun.

"What do you mean hornin' in here thisaway, Alstop? We didn't hire you as a bank examiner. Where's Holbrook?"

Jake stood back against the desk, his legs spraddled a little. "Holbrook's restin', I reckon."

Corrigan snarled, "Get away from that desk, Alstop, and leave them books behind. We've had enough o' your brand of lawin'. Get out!"

Jake smiled slowly. "Reckon I'm keepin' these books, an' I'm keepin' you, Corrigan!"

WITH those words, Jake drew his gun with the speed of light. Corrigan's mouth sagged at sight of that gunmagic. He hadn't had time to go for his gun. Harris was staring over Corrigan's shoulder, his hand half crooked as though he was about to draw, but thought better of it.

"Harris, you fool, gun him!" Corrigan cried. "What for am I payin' you gun wages?"

"Yuh ain't payin' me tuh commit suicide, boss. He's got the drop. . . ."

"Drop be damned!" Corrigan went for his gun but before it cleared leather, Jake's gun roared. Corrigan cursed, shaking a numbed hand that was bleeding from a cut across the knuckles. Still Harris didn't draw. He had seen Jake's magic gun work before.

Jake jerked his head at the young bank assistant. "Get them guns, son. Then open the vault an' let Holbrook out. I'm arrestin' Corrigan for robbery, Harris for murder, an' Banker Holbrook for assistin' in robbery."

Corrigan snarled, "Alstop, you're a fool!"

Jake grinned, "Mebbe so." Then he turned to the assistant who had let Holbrook out to join the other two. "You, son, bring them books up to the jail. I'm impoundin' 'em for further use."

With that, Jake forced the three men to march outside and up the street toward the jail. Men, loitering in the street, gaped at the strange procession.

Corrigan arrested! Harris and Holbrook with him! It was unbelievable. One Lawbadge, taking in the whole shebang!

Jake saw some of the men scurry to Red Looper's. Jake's jaw firmed, and his mouth became a grim line in his face. For the next hour, he'd be riding trouble damned hard.

He reached the jail, forced the three men into the one cell, and locked the door. Then he went back to the office where the books of the bank were piled on the desk, and awaited developments.

CHAPTER V

SHOWDOWN

HE hadn't long to wait. He sent the assistant away, in case there should be a fight. From where he was, he could see the main drag, and he could see knots of men gathering ominously. A crowd began to gather about the jail itself. They were mostly curious folks of the more decent element.

Soon there was a rumble of low voices. The crowd parted, drew back. Through the open space, came Vance and Hasset, leading the grizzled pack of gunslicks who had, until lately, labeled themselves The Citizen's Committee.

Vance didn't enter the jail office. He remained out in the open, and called to Jake on the inside.

Jake felt of his gun. His face was a blank mask but his eyes burned like hot coals. He got up slowly and legged to the door, stopping on the threshold. For a full minute, he stared at the big, sagging figure of Vance, twirling his short rope, and at Hasset with his snag tooth and greasy whiskers.

"I been expectin' you, Vance," Jake said softly.

Vance cleared his loose throat with a rasping sound. "Yuh're a bigger fool than I figgered yuh for, Alstop," he said slowly, his thick lips puffing out over the words. "Yuh come ridin' in here like God Almighty. Yuh refuse to prosecute Job Orcutt, the most suspicious individual in the valley, yet yuh throw honest citizens into jail. I don't like it worth a damn. Yuh're through, Alstop—done—finished!"

"No, I'm not finished, Vance," Jake said in the same soft voice. "I'm arresting you, Vance, for robbery and worse."

Vance's jaw dropped at this show of nerve. There was a shuffle in the crowd. The Citizen's Committee drew closer together, hands close to guns. "Well, I'll be . . . " Vance began.

Hasset pulled at his greasy whiskers and jibbered, "He's blowin' off steam! He won't touch Orcutt 'cause he's soft on the gal!"

"Shut up, Hasset!" Vance roared. Then he turned back to Jake. "I'm givin' yuh just five minutes tuh turn them men loose."

"I told you that you're under arrest, Vance. Give me your guns," Jake said crisply.

"On what evidence?"

A hush had come over the crowd. Jake jerked his head at the ledgers on his desk. "I got the play figured out proper," Jake said in a voice that all could hear. "You, Vance, an' Corrigan engineered them bank robberies with the help of Banker Holbrook. You charged off the loss against the stockmen who had money in the bank, and stood your share accordin' to the books. But a few days after the robberies, you, an' Corrigan an' some of your bunch, deposited back enough money in the bank to make up for your own losses, and what you had charged against the others. Then, last night five thousand dollars of bail money was stolen from

my safe. This mornin', Holbrook was crediting that five thousand to Corrigan's account. It's all in a little secret ledger."

Hasset screamed, "He's makin' big talk for nothin'! What about Orcutt?"

Jake went on, ignoring the interruption, "Stickney started to give me the lowdown the night Corrigan bailed Harris outta jail. Stickney was killed. I figger Corrigan had the job done, an' I figger Harris did it. Harris was wearin' this silver ornament as a watch charm the night I took him in." Jake drew the silver ornament from his pocket. "It's an ornament from Job Orcutt's saddle which Harris probably picked up whilst trailin' Job. Corrigan figgered to throw more suspicion on Orcutt to force my hand. Orcutt's got a secret that Corrigan wants bad."

Vance was glowering like a mad bull. He shrugged his slouched shoulders and looked up from his watch as though Jake had never spoken. "Yuh talk too much Alstop. Yuh got just one minute left."

Jake knew the danger. The peaceful element of the town were afraid to back a Lawbadge who seemed to have no chance. They took his evidence, gleaned from the ledgers, at face value, but they were still skeptical about Orcutt. He couldn't give them the lowdown on Orcutt, so he had to face the thing out alone.

Grimly, Jake stepped down from the door. He moved toward Vance. "You're under arrest Vance. Give me your guns!"

Vance crouched. His loose body seemed to tighten. "All right, here they are!"

VANCE'S draw was showy, but swift. Jake stopped in his tracks. His eyes were taking in the scene clearly. He saw Hasset pulling his gun. There was no time, now, for fancy shots. Jake's arm hardly moved. His wrist lashed like a snake, striking. A gun appeared in his hand as if by magic. The crowd surged back.

The two guns seemed to speak as one. Jake felt a curious plucking at his thigh. His gun was jumping again. Vance was swaying on his bowed legs, trying to stand erect. His hand hung wearily at his side. He tried to lift it for another shot, but he died standing up.

As Vance fell, confusion was born. There were cries, excited voices. The Citizen's Committee was dropping back for cover. Jake looked for Hasset but couldn't see him. The Citizen's Committee was opening up with eager guns.

The sudden confusion was stilled by a voice that came from the rear of the crowd. It was a girl's voice.

"Stand fixed, every last man of you!"

Jake's heart pounded at the sound of Sally's voice. A lane had opened in the crowd, and in the lane was Sally, and Doc Randall. The Doctor held a big gun firmly in his pudgy hand. The Citizen's Committee, covered front and rear, were afraid to make a move. Sally walked bravely up to Jake's side, and faced the crowd.

"I'm breaking a promise, coming here like this, but Doctor Randall has convinced me it is the only way to save a brave man from defeat. I'll tell you the source of my father's wealth—the secret of his trips away from Yellow River. Sometime ago, he struck a seam of gold in the gravel at the shallows of Mormon creek. It was a freak pocket and dad knew if his strike was made public, the place would swarm with gold hunters. He knew that Corrigan would trick him out of his claim and he'd have nothing left for his trouble but grief so he kept it a secret, hoping to work it out before anybody else discovered it. Corrigan suspected the truth, and had my dad trailed, but dad

threw the trailers off the track. Corrigan with his Citizen's Committee has made a pretense of law in Yellow River Valley, which is worse than no law at all. We've got a chance, now, to have honest law, and if we're not fools, we'll back that chance to the limit!"

There was a shout of approval from the crowd. They closed in on the gunnies who claimed to be the Citizen's Committee. For a moment Jake was unable to speak. He knew what it cost Sally to break her promise to her dad. He couldn't find words to thank her. He gripped her arm tightly.

At the same moment, there was a low laugh behind Jake. Corrigan snarled, "You've played yore string out, Lawbadge. Make one move an' I'll blow out the back of yore head!"

Jake stiffened. He still held his gun but he couldn't us it. He realized what had happened. Hasset had dodged into the jail in the confusion, and turned the prisoners loose. Jake acted with the speed of light. With one movement, he hurled Sally aside, out of danger, and threw himself to the ground.

SLUGS roared over him. He rolled, swinging his gun on the black rectangle of the jail door. Fiercely, with deadly effect, he slammed his shots at the shadows hunkered inside. Corrigan fell out of the door, his face plowing into the earth. Harris dropped on the threshold. Hasset tried to jump over Harris's body, and dodged into a slug that flattened him against the wall. Holbrook was the only one left inside, and he was screaming for mercy, his hands high above his head.

Jake got up, brushing the dust from his clothing. The crowd pressed toward him, congratulating him, assuring him of their support. Doc Randall came, herding the disarmed Citizen's Committee before him.

Jake dodged away from it all. He had to find Sally. She was standing alone around the corner of the jail. Her face was grave but her eyes glowed with a soft, new light.

"Sally, that—that was a brave thing you done to help me. I can't say I'm worth it. You're the kind that make a promise mean something. Sometime, mebbe you'll make me a promise. I'll see that your dad gets protection on his claim," Jake said softly.

"Perhaps I owe you something, too," she told him. "We don't sell horses at our ranch, Jake, but I'd like to give you your pick as a token for what you've just done. You've made Yellow River Valley free and decent again. And, well, I'd feel closer to you, knowing you were riding a horse that I loved."

Jake grinned and the look he gave her made the color come to her cheeks. "I'll accept the horse, Sally. Who knows—it might stay in the family after all!"

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CHAPTER I

The Double W Diamond

AS "The Riding Kid" dropped from the pick-up horse and walked down the arena, where he had tossed his hat when the pick-up gun had barked, he caught sight of the sneering face and malevolent eyes of "Snook" Lucas, who was acting as one of the bucking-horse judges.

Loud cheers were ringing from the crowds, hats were being tossed into the air by the top hands gathered around the corrals and chutes, and the Kid realized that he had made a perfect ride. They had dealt him Sage Creek, a raw one, when he should have had an easy ride and then been far and away the best boy of the last three days; but while he glowed at the applause from the stands, felt proud that old-timers and Wyoming's best bucking-horse riders had given him the greatest tribute a buckaroo can expect, still the impression obtained that he was *jobbed*. Thirty minutes later, after a miserable exhibition by "Fudge" Temple, on Fade-away Fannie, the announcer gave the judges'

The Riding Kid

by Norton L. James

Author of "Colt Law Backs a Cattle Empire," etc.

Rodeo oldtimers and Wyoming's best bucking-horse forkers had given The Riding Kid the greatest tribute a buckaroo could expect—yet The Kid got only third money—and a bulldogger's job in hell!

decision: Fudge had won first money, Slim Kelley second, and The Riding Kid third. Hoots and jeers followed.

Then and right then is where the Kid made a mistake.

He sought out Snook Lucas, and what he told him was lurid; and when he had exhausted language, he pulled the judge from his saddle and thoroughly thrashed him, to the unutterable delight of all ropers, riders, bulldoggers and horse handlers.

As two special policemen started across the arena, the Kid slung a leg up behind Tom Curtis, and the two men ambled out on the track and into town; the Kid suddenly decided that he would not await the writing of the third money check; he had the hunch that trouble was coming his way and that right now he would prove to the cock-eyed West that he was sure enough The Riding Kid.

He and Tom dropped in at Trout's livery stable, where the Kid's saddle and other rigging were hanging, and after a brief conference the Kid was loaded into a horse car leaving that night for Tucumcari; and when the moon arose he was sitting, with two handlers, playing pitch.

Three days later he dropped out of the car at the little ranch town of Chico just as the sun was sinking.

With his saddle swinging over a shoulder and his bridle and blanket flopping about his broad back, he walked up the dusty lane which led to Center Street. And as he pushed up the slight incline his tired eyes spotted a saloon, and he made for it like a thirsty horse for a water trough.

He was about to order his usual shot of hard liquor when a small printed sign above the cash register caught his eye. It read:

> "Climb! There are no elevators in the house of success!"

"Dog-gone!" he muttered. "Ef that ain't a-slappin' me right plumb center, then y'u kin kick me loose from my jeans."

"What'll it be?" queried the bartender.

"A little claret in a long, lean glass. Something that'll irrigate four half sections of freight-train thirst," said the Kid, smiling.

THE bartender grunted; he hadn't served claret since the last county fair; and then only because it was all he had left. But he shoved the beverage across the bar and the Kid sipped it sheepishly.

From across the street came the sounds of crashing glass and breaking wood. Frequently a curse stabbed the expiring day, and once in a while a smothered cry that one knew was nothing short of interrupted agony.

"Nice peaceful party going on over yonder," offered the Kid.

"Yep," spoke the bartender. "'Spider' Morgan is out on his first August drunk, and he always cleans up about six before he starts singing."

"Who's this self-same Spider Morgan?"

The saloon man squinted into the Kid's face, dropped his eyes to the saddle reposing on the floor, near the door, raised his face, and in a look of disgust, said: "I mighta known, from the looks of that riggin' of yuhrs, that you was Wyomin' fed. Why, Spider, he's dern near all, Spider Morgan!"

"And that means a lot, I betcha!"

"Thay is some fellas as gets money this a way and some as gets it opposite; Spider's bad all ways; gets his money all ways; runs this town when he's itchin' for a pee-rade, an' if I was just nobody else but you, I'd stop asking questions."

The Kid laughed; the bartender studied his face at that sound of his mirth, accepted the quarter for the wine, and watched The Riding Kid as he picked up his saddle and started for the door.

Just at that instant a man burst into the room; his eyes were wide and wild.

"He's comin' out," he shouted, bumping into the Kid.

"Who?" asked the Kid.

"Morgan!" replied the man. "An' he's comin' a-foggin'. I was a-peekin'

into the Last Chance an' I seen him slough six of them FF Quarter Circle hands. Talked 'em right into bein' silly. Told 'em he could whip the six of 'em battle royal, no guns, an' he shore knows his beans. Looka yonder! He's comin' out, an' there's Miss Billie Hearn just unhookin' her ponies."

The Riding Kid opened the door and was about to step out on the street when he saw an enormous man, at least six foot three, of great breadth of shoulder and torso, issue from the opposite saloon. The uncanny bulk and beastly appearance of the figure staggering from the doorway across the street appalled, amazed and incensed the young cow-puncher instantly. Then he heard a voice back of him.

"Close that door, hombre; don't let Spider see you an' that bee-stung saddle of yours or he'll tear you apart and put you together again."

The Riding Kid glanced into the room and once more laughed in his chill, mirthless way; then he slammed the door and walked toward a span of buckskin ponies hitched to a new buckboard, beside which stood a young woman dressed in a handsome, tight-fitting riding suit.

"There goes the only man I ever see drink claret," said the bartender to the fear-gripped man before the bar, "that I jest wouldn't like to mix it with. Didja hear him laugh? Say!"

BUT his companion did not hear him. He was watching Morgan, who, in turn, was watching the slim figure of the girl beside the buckskins. The Riding Kid walked to the buckboard, and he was never afterward able to tell why, and threw his saddle, bridle, and blanket on top of some groceries in the back of the rig. When he turned around, Morgan was wrenching the tie ropes loose from the hitch rack and was doing the job in such riotous fashion that the spirited horses were pulling away from the rack and rapidly becoming frightened.

"Drop those ties, Morgan!" the Kid heard the girl shout, and then he saw Spider lurch toward her.

"You just tell that old man of yours that I did this to you, and that I did it purposelike. Tell him that!" The voice of the bully was half banter and wholly loathsome; it contained sharp, rasping qualities which hurt the ear and called out every hateful emotion in the Kid.

Morgan reached the girl with a bear-like lurch, caught her hands within one of his own, and was pressing his face downward toward hers when The Riding Kid leaped and hurled the giant from the little woman with a singular movement of a wrist interlocked under Spider's chin. The act had within it a startling effect which rendered the bully stupefied for an instant; then he shot forward.

The Riding Kid did not move. On the contrary, his gray eyes twinkled, a leg slid a bit wide and a trifle forward, and a smile formed about the soft lines of his mouth—a smile that was at once a warning, or should have been, and a grave menace.

The two men from the saloon he had just left stared from the door; other men crowded from other buildings; a few loungers, down the street, came toward the scene on the run. To see Morgan in a street fight was always a sight to all of Chico; the town didn't have long to wait.

With a snarl of rage which rumbled in his throat, Spider hurled himself at the lithe figure before him. But The Riding Kid's right hand flashed, landed, and Morgan's head snapped back; then the left drove to the upraised chin, and Morgan sprawled face down in the dust. The Kid deliberately turned his back and busied himself un-

hitching the ponies.

"Watch him, son," yelled the bartender, who had served The Riding Kid the claret. "When he gets up, look out for a knife. You've made a record, and you wanta be careful that you get outa town without losing pres-tege. Watch him when he gets up!"

"I'll be gone when he gets up," returned the Kid; then to the girl he said: "Ma'am, you get in and hold 'em quiet till I gets my saddle outa your rig. I flung it in there not a-knowing just what I was a-doing."

He turned the buckskins from the rack. The girl sprang to the driver's seat.

"Can't I take you where you're going?" she asked.

"I ain't a-going any place reg'lar," he replied with a smile. "I just dropped off a train hoping I could get a job a-riding for some outfit down here."

"Jump in!"

"Does you know of a job?"

"Jump in! You're hired now!"

THE KID settled himself beside the girl, and the team sprang away on a fast trot. When the dust behind them hid the little village, the girl stared into the Riding Kid's face and actually smiled. A light, a wholesome glad light, was dancing in her eyes.

"Right now," she said, "if you wanted that town back there and wanted it pulled up and served on a plate, you could sure have it!"

"Meanin' which?"

"That you're the first and only man Chico ever saw who could knock Spider Morgan off his feet!"

"Maybe I couldn'ta done it if he hadn't poked his snoot so close to your face. Lord! Something just went wham—deep down in me. I ain't no scrapper with my knuckles. I'm what you might call just a sun-baked fool canary what ain't much when he's out of a saddle."

'Wait till I tell dad," returned the girl. "Just you wait! And if you like a pretty layout, wait till you see the Double W Diamond. It's as fine an outfit as lays out of doors."

"Double W Diamond?"

"Yes. My dad's the owner, and we're right proud of that ranch."

"What might your name be?" he asked eagerly.

"Billie!"

"Billie? Billie what?"

"Billie Hearn. And my father's name is Tom Hearn."

THE Kid crossed a leg, pulled out his tobacco, and began to braid a cigarette. A smile stole over his face, and his head dropped in a way that struck the girl as an involuntary sweep of uncontrollable timidity. She liked that soft confusion of color which she discerned was stealing from under the layer of dust on his cheek. There was something girlish in that blush.

"What makes you seem so satisfied?" she asked.

"Shucks!" He licked the cigarette paper, snapped a match head to a flame, and turned his eyes to hers, cupping a palm to keep the match going. "I just know that with a brand like the Double W. Diamond and a name like Hearn, that I've come plumb home at last."

He lit his smoke to avoid his confusion. They both laughed, and that was how The Riding Kid was hired as a top hand on the best ranch that lay around Chico. And that night, after Billie had told of her meeting with The Riding Kid, she said: "Dad! Why, do you know, dad, I think a man has come to our ranch?"

"Huh!" remarked her father stolidly. "Just so's he ain't *the* man, honey."

Billie snatched a kiss at the grim lips of her father and ran, laughing, from the room.

CHAPTER II

Rustlers

IT took The Riding Kid just two weeks to get the lay of the country around the Double W Diamond and not nearly so long to win a home for himself in the hearts of all the boys.

From the first squeak of the corral gate, the morning after he arrived, as it opened to admit him and his two ropes, when he sidled, with a smile, up to the wickedest bronc in the lot, every man on the place knew that the Kid was there and savvied his rigging. But when he had gentled that blue roan and brought it back alather and a-leaking, he had them all afoul. His fight with Morgan was one thing; his handling of rope, saddle, and horse was another; and the latter demonstration was what won for him and wins for every new hand on a big outfit.

They put him to riding fence; and he did it for ten days; all alone with a pair of fence pliers and a few feet of wire. One day, late in the afternoon, the foreman, Hank Worth—they called him "Worthless" for short—saw the Kid ambling in a hurry out of the broken country to the west and slanting across the landscape on the full and graceful lope of that magnificient roan. Hank edged over the bottom, and The Riding Kid swerved a bit to meet him. Hank was the first to speak.

"How you get that air hole in your hat?" he asked.

"I'm a-setting up on that big flat red mesa near alongside that spring what don't know water, and I'm a-dreaming about this here country, all checkerboarded up with plenty of just-sure-enough land, when I sees a fellow sliding through a gap in them sand hills to the west. Well, I piled onto old Rocking Chair and began to sling sand.

"WHEN I'd made what I figgered was about enough distance, I took my time and edged into the cat-claw, mesquite, and greasewood till I could see a heap with being seen none a-tall. And I seen aplenty. Off about six hundred yards a critter is down, a horse is standing reg'larlike, and a stingy fire is curling up off the sand. I sure knew them symptoms; and I was brave enough to keep outa sight. When I see a pair of tongs whip into and outa that fire and a puff of smoke come off'n that *'orejana,'* I edged around and watched him doctor another about a quarter mile away. Right then I figgered which a way he would head the two of 'em outa that big swale, and I guessed him just right. I was looking down at a trail when I heard him a-comin' a-shovin' them yearlins ahead by a-singin' to 'em. When he was under me I unwound a little old 'wild-cat loop and jerked him off'n his pinto and drug him up to the sand to where I could see him spit. I had him all hog tied and was a-goin' back to get his horse when something went a-plowing through my Stetson; then another come along and skinned my Hamley right at the top of the seat, see!"

"Uh-huh!" commented Hank. "Then what'd you do?"

"I just vacated that bottom, and Rocking Chair and me cut across lots and left them hombres alone."

"How many miles from here?"

"I'd say a good eighteen."

"Then it's no use."

"Thats what I figgered, but—"

"But what?"

"Soon's I get something that looks like food, I'm moving out, by the light of the moon, and a-leading a horse and a-riding that buckskin. I've a hunch them babies will just be about where they don't expect we ain't, along about nine or ten; and I'm a-wantin' to see what kinda sign they leave and where

they sleep; after that I'll romp in here and break up the boys' sleep."

"What kinda lookin' fella was the one you put the twine on?" asked the foreman.

"Little old runt Mex, with a spot in his left eye and a scar on his right cheek like some husky had bent a six-gun barrel around his jaw. And he had a sorta bum foot, from the way he wore one shoe and one boot. Kinda likable fella, for a greaser, too."

"He's a new one. Did he talk?"

"Nope! I'd whirligigged him right dizzy when I drug him up onto the flat, and all he did was to catch up on his breath; but, man! he sure can give you a dirty look!"

"You're spotted, Kid, an' I'd rather send a hand with you to-night."

"Worthless, them fellows tried to ruin my saddle and did puncture my 'cascabel,' so I reckon it's up to me to do this one trick, all lonesome; and I'd like it just that a way. I'll drop in at the house, tickle the Chinaman, and get some chow; when you boys come in, I'll be gone."

"One of us will be up a-waitin'; an' we'll have some ponies grained an' ready to ride, when you come back."

"Adios!"

"So long!"

The foreman rode one way and The Riding Kid jogged along to the ranch house. In thirty minutes he was seen heading northwest riding a buckskin and leading a tall, rangy sorrel. Billie Hearn saw him riding trail, by edging into the pear thicket beyond the hay barns, and after a conference with the Chinaman cook, she ran to the stable and, saddling her paint pony, set an oblique course that would bring her out on the top of Wagon Mound. At supper the Chinaman laid a note on Tom Hearn's plate. It read:

DAD: The Riding Kid has gone out after some men he caught branding our yearlings to-day; and I've gone along just to see the fun. I won't go beyond Wagon Mound, but if I'm not in by the time the moon goes down, then have the boys trail me. I'll leave something at the top of the mound that will tell you why I couldn't get home. Don't worry! That Kid oughtn't to take such chances, dad. And you oughtn't to let him!

BILLIE.

Tom Hearn laughed low and long and read the tiny scrap of paper twice. Then he took it to the bunk house and stuck it under the eyes of the foreman.

"Tell four of the boys to get to bed and have them up at eleven," he said after Hank gave him back the note. "If I don't miss my guess I reckon, we'll all be riding to see the sun come up."

CHAPTER III

To the Rescue

THE RIDING KID had reached the piñon and into it he rode for nearly a mile before he dismounted and led his horses to a water hole; and as they drank, he sang. Sang soft and low and patted the sorrel's shoulder to the beat of his homely tune.

Me, all a-straddle
Of a Fremont saddle
A-ridin' beneath the stars.
What's that I see,
Just a-waitin' for me?
My gal—by the old home bars.

"Dog-gone, hoss!" he exclaimed. "If you ever say a word about what I'm a-whisperin' in your ear, boy! I'll ride that broom tail off'n you so clean it'll sure look whittled!"

Then he pulled the sorrel's head to his face and chuckled into a shapely ear. After that he mounted and rode casually and carefully into the heart of the timber to a high ridge where he could sweep the country for miles.

The course he had followed had been such that he was now closer to the town by three miles than when he had left the ranch. The road which led from the

main State hightway at Chico to the region south and west of the small town, wound its miserable way through the ancient sea bottom below him.

At the merest guess, that the men who had been branding Double W Diamond cows would head out of the country that night, and that they would make for their camp or headquarters, he had chosen the high land of the piñon hills for an observation.

One, two, three hours went by—hours that seemed to the Kid like dream moments; for, as he sat, cigarette aglow, at the foot of a high rock, he revolved over and over in his mind the ride from Chico with Billie Hearn; and his thoughts were daring and delightful; and on he dreamed and stared at the moon as it rose higher and higher across th southern heavens.

Then, far in the dim blue distance of the basin below him, he caught what seemed to be a moving shadow. This he made out as a cloud of dust. On it came. At last it swung, and from this he knew where the road lay, toward the very ridge on which he sat. And as his eyes followed it, he saw six horsemen tearing from clump to clump, now visible in a bunch, now hidden by the dense desert growth, but on they came till they were immediately in front of a sheer rock called Wagon Mound. Here the band stopped in a whirl of dust, and when the cloud had vanished, he saw that the riders had broken apart. Two were circling the pinnacle rock and four were sidling to the slope which led to its summit. This intrigued him, and after an instant, as the moon came out in a brilliant flash of light from behind a cloud, he raised his eyes and looked at the top of the Mound.

HIS cigarette fell from his lips; his boots crunched in the gravel, and in an instant he had mounted the sorrel and was dashing toward the point of Wagon Mound which reached out, from one of its lower arms, almost to the floor of the ridge on which he rode. And as he tore through the trees, his eyes were riveted upon a slight form which was madly rushing along the summit of the barren rock.

He knew that figure! Recognized that soft, upturned white Stetson and knew that Billie Hearn, for some inexplicable reason, had been on one of her night rides and was now caught, like a woodchuck, on a barren rock. Caught like—

Why were those men out there bent on taking her? Did they, too, recognize that hat and that lithe and beautiful figure? His blood seemed to choke him as it pounded in his throat. The long, shanked spurs drove deep into the flanks of the sorrel, goading it forward at breakneck speed over that treacherous ridge.

Then he knew that the girl had learned of her peril. There was her pony in the piñon. He saw her race to the edge of the mound; discerned her indecision as she sought a point of descent; saw her turn and run down the dangerous slope which led to the ridge on which he was riding, stand awe-stricken at the brink of a sheer drop of two hundred feet, and stare across the twenty-foot chasm to the safety of the opposite point. She could not reach her pony.

At that instant The Riding Kid pulled his six-gun and discharged it into the night. The girl raised her face, and as the moonlight fell upon it, he saw its strange and fear-stricken lines, its half-opened lips, and then of a sudden a glad expression reached into it, and he knew that he was recognized.

His pony halted on the very edge of the abyss, and the Kid jumped to the earth shaking out his lasso rope as he lit.

"Miss Billie!" he shouted.

"I hear you!" she answered.

"Catch this rope and tie it around a rock!"

"All right!"

When she had secured one end of the lariat, she turned a face toward him that was filled with eagerness, and waited for the sound of his voice—waited like a frail and eager child.

"Wrap it around a rock. Under that juttin' edge, back of you. Don't worry; there's sixty feet in this old piece of 'Broncho Bob,' and she's seven sixteenths thick. Take your time, Miss Billie; them fellas ain't started up yet, I'm watchin' 'em!"

The girl obeyed and tied the rope firmly and lay back on it with all her strength. Once again she whirled and faced him for instruction. Her faith in his ability to extricate her from the danger she was in, was pitiful.

"Now," he said, almost in a calm tone, "half hitch that manila around your body, and get a good grip on the rope you've tied. I'm a-wantin' you to drop down that ledge you're on for about twenty feet. Will you do it?"

"Of course!" she answered with a grim ring to her voice.

"Steady!" he yelled. "Flop on your stomach, Miss Billie, and slide over till that hemp gets tight, that's the way. Now! Just a little at a time. I'm a-watchin' the slack on this side and a-paying it out as you need it. Lay agin' that wall!"

DOWN the girl went; foot by foot, till she reached a narrow shelf which stood out from the wall. Here the Riding Kid told her to rest. After a brief respite from the tearing and tugging on her waist and hands, the Kid spoke again.

"Take a little of the slack from this end of the rope and when you've got seven or eight feet, double loop it and tie it close to your body. There ain't no weight on the up-rope, now."

She followed his directions; told him that it was firmly secured.

"Now go on down, with that slack, just as slow as you can, till you've payed it all out."

"Do you mean to pull me across?"

"That's it; and I gotta have near thirty feet to make the riffle. Hurry; they're coming up the west side now."

Once more the girl was lowering herself into the black shadows of the rock. Now the Kid lost sight of her completely; and then he heard her voice.

"It's all out!" she shouted. "And I'm hanging free! Pull!"

Slowly, and with a firm, hand-over-hand pull, he drew her toward him until after a tremendous exertion he succeeded in holding her long enough until one of her feet reached out and caught an outcrop under the ledge on which he lay.

Snubbing the lass rope around a rock at his side, he jumped down the ledge, walked out grasped her hand, and drew her beside him. Quickly he pulled his knife and cut both ends of the rope and with her hurried back to the sorrel. Here he mounted; she back of him.

As they were about to tear away from the scene, a form appeared over the slope of the summit and a gun barked. He felt a shiver run along the arm that entwined his waist and felt sure that the bullet had found a mark in the girl clinging to his body. He pressed her arms to his side, touched his horse, and was lost in the trees. Two hundred yards away he slowed down, turned in the saddle, and saw that Billie Hearn had fainted. Tenderly he swung her to the earth and holding her erect with a hand, dropped to her side.

In a moment she opened her eyes and exclaimed: "It didn't hit you!"

"No'm it didn't hit me; but I was allowing it got you. Where you feel the pain?"

"Why," she replied, "as we started away, I heard the gun crack back of us; then a whiff of sound by my ear; and as I clung to you I saw the moonlight through the rim of your Stetson. Don't you know your hat is ripped?"

He pulled off his hat and saw that the left rim was indeed slit. A slight shudder passed through the girl's frame, and she closed her eyes; it seemed to the Kid that in all his life he had never seen anything so beautiful as that face, now in utter repose and bathed in the glory of a shaft of moonlight which dropped through a rift in the trees.

FROM the region behind and below the Mound he heard voices shouting to the top of the sentinel rock. These sounds aroused Billie, and she sat up, arranging her hair, picked up her hat, that had fallen beside her, and spoke in a voice suggestive of humiliation.

"You see," she said, "I suppose I was pretty well shocked, with the stunt I had passed through, so, when I saw where that bullet had perforated your hat, I wilted. I promise you not to pull any more weak-sister plays like that."

"I'm tickled silly," was all he said, and held out a hand, quickly pulling her to her feet. "Now, Miss Billie, if you are strong enough—"

"Strong enough!" She withered him with her tone.

"All the same we gotta work a lot and do quite some hard ridin'. And I want you to go the limit when we start."

"I'll go where you go!"

He looked into her eyes; the phrase startled and delighted him. "Of course," he said; then added: "Go climb into my saddle and get down to the buckskin." He indicated with the sweep of an arm where he had left the other horse.

"Aren't you coming, too?"

"No'm, not exactly now! I wantta slant an eye on these birds, and while I'm doin' it, I'll edge down this slope and bring your pony back. I seen him in the fringe of that scrub pine down that a way. Them boys, down there, ain't spotted him yet."

"Then I'll go along—"

"Don't gum the cards, Miss Billie! This ain't perzactly the first jam I've stuck my haid into; and I reckon I'm cute enough to pull it out, whole. I've heard a lota thunder in *my* time!"

"You'll be careful, won't you? Please!"

"Me! Why, me, ma'am!" He could proceed no further; there gleamed a vexatious light in the girl's eyes which rendered him utterly incapable of speech. It was as though some vast light had flared up before his vision, blinding him.

He jerked a carbine from his saddle boot and started on a run down the slope. "Amble to that buckskin just as slow as you want," he flung back over his shoulder.

FIFTEEN minutes later Billie heard a crashing in the timber and The Riding Kid darted into sight on her pony, his long legs hanging nearly to the ground. "Come on," he said. "They're workin' both sides of this rim, and we gotta get down off'n here, pronto!"

They changed horses and rode from the scene, the Kid leading the buckskin.

"Down this way," said Billie, after a few moments, "right down this draw, and we'll come out, directly, upon a mesa corner. If we can get on top of that flat, we can get home dead easy."

"You lead," the Kid answered, and the girl swung her pony ahead.

"Don't you think it would be a good idea to turn that lead horse loose and let him go home? Maybe he'll throw those fellows, on this side, off our trail," said Billie.

"That's an idea," said The Riding

Kid and he unhooked the halter from the buckskin and slapped him over the back with it. The animal swerved into the underbrush and took down the hill on a run. Soon they saw him, head and tail up, tearing at a swift lope up the opposite slope. Two guns were heard, but the horse continued until it disappeared in some scrub pine. Evidently their pursuers were not to be sidetracked by a riderless horse, for they were heard coming swiftly up the bottom below; and just as the boy and the girl reached the foot of the ridge, they saw two horses dash into the moonlight.

"Go on!" yelled the Kid.

HE twisted in his saddle, rose stiff-legged in a stirrup, and sent a bullet crashing in the direction of the riders below him. One of the horses went down, and its rider was thrown headlong into a clump of mesquite; the other horse never hesitated, but came on at a rapid rate. The Riding Kid joined Billie. Just as they were about to round a corner of the bottom, where they would be temporarily secure from the man behind them, a gun sounded and the horse the Kid was riding dropped in its tracks.

"Dog-gone," yelled The Riding Kid. "You keep on, Miss Billie. I'm plumb afoot. And right here is where I carry grief to the baby that slugged this sorrel."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," she answered, swinging her pony around. "Climb up back of me."

"And that ain't hard to take, neither," responded the Kid, swinging immediately behind the girl. On they went around the bend and hurried straight ahead for the corner of the mesa. The pony tired rapidly, under its double load, and the cowboy realized that the small animal, weighing not over six hunderd pounds, would never succeed in carrying them up the steep sides of the bench fast enough to escape their pursuer. Hanging to the front roll of the girl's saddle, he saw a rope, and reaching around Billie, he shook it loose from the tie strings. As they flashed through a narrow defile in the bottom, he slid over the haunches of the pony and dropped to the earth. The girl slowed up her pinto. "Come on!" she shouted. "Get back here!"

"Go ahead," cried the Kid. "I'm about to play an old army trick on this bird. You crowd that pinto and don't come back till you hear me; then come a-fannin'. I'll be a-needin' you."

There was some quality in the man's carefree, half-taunt, half-banter voice which allayed her fears. She dug a rowel into the pinto and fled away.

The Riding Kid whipped one end of the lass rope around a greasewood tree, ran eight feet away, and snubbed the line about a thick piñon stump. Then he sat down, in a deep shadow, and waited. The galloping hoofs up the trail came nearer and more distinct; a horse flashed into view, a man bending low over the pommel. The forefeet of the running pony struck the taut lasso and both rider and horse crashed to the earth almost at the very spot where The Riding Kid crouched.

THE horse struggled to its feet, but the body of the man lay outstretched and immobile. The Riding Kid grasped a bridle line of the frightened animal, turned the stunned man over on his face, and saw where a deep rock cut, along his cheek, had rendered him unconscious. The Kid yelled to Billie, who turned and came back on the run. One look at the upturned face of the senseless man and she said: "That's Kansas Toomey. And my dad will give a heap to get the goods on him."

"Seems like that won't be harder than two whoops and a holler. I'll wake him up and shove him along ahead of us."

"Boom! Boom! Crack! Zingeeee!

"That's a .45-.90, Miss Billie," said the Kid. "If I ain't plumb off my feed, I reckon it's about recess time for us, on this here job. Them other boys is comin'!"

"Let's go!" cried the girl, and The Riding Kid sprang to the fallen man's saddle and hurried up the gulch. At its end they came to the mesa corner and rode to the top of the table-land. Here, far before them, they saw a cloud of dust.

"I reckon we better be a-thinkin' about doin' a little crawfishin', right here and now," cried the Kid. "This country's as full of bad hombres as a sheep is of ticks. Which a way does you reckon we better be a-slantin', Miss Billie?"

"Wait!"

"All right, but kindly remember that I ain't got nothing but my six-gun, and if they get close enough for me to use that, it won't be many George Washington birthdays I'll be a-seein' after the grand march starts."

"That's Beeswing, in the lead! Beeswing!"

"Them's just like turkey buzzards to me. Whatcha mean, Beeswing?"

"That's the new horse father bought. It arrived at the ranch this morning while you were away."

"Glory be to the Highest and shout all ye sinners, shout!"

The little paint horse shot along the top of the mesa and The Riding Kid followed, a grin upon his face and his body lifted from the saddle by his stiffened legs held rigid in the stirrups. Half a mile away and the boy and the girl met Tom Hearn and three of the boys from the ranch. Quickly they told of the encounter, and The Riding Kid and the cowboys from the Double W Diamond turned off to the right and made for the lower edge of the mesa.

Shortly after breakfast they rode up to the ranch house and reported that the men who had attempted the kidnaping of the girl had successfully made their escape; even the man who had fallen in the gulch had been removed by his companions. They had followed the trail up and over the ridge, down its west side, and into the brush of the desert only to lose it amid the countless cattle and team tracks of the road.

CHAPTER IV

A Threat From the Gang

WHEN the Kid rolled into his blankets, he went almost instantly to sleep; and as he slumbered, he dreamed, and, dreaming, he lived once more a brief space of time when, as he sat in a spray of moonlight under the high pines of the ridge, he saw a face that was to him as beautiful and and as distant as the very stars which peeped and twinkled at him from the rifts in the trees.

Now, in a cow country, a rustler isn't exactly what one imagines him to be. He isn't a fearful thing or a man that has the countryside frightened stiff. He's generally a boy that's too free with his rope and too full of ambition—the sort of fellow that would give you his last cent and drive your yearlings away after he had deposited the copper.

He isn't feared, whatever he may do; but what he does do sure riles the landscape and makes good men commit what they take a sort of sad delight in. Under the skies, fighting dust and cold and drought and no-grass conditions, the alchemy of the open breeds a race of men who are appalled at crime. Yet, rustlers are hard when they're cornered; don't whimper when they're up against the end of a bad career, and get so cute that it keeps old-timers in the

cow business stepping sideways to checkmate all the different ways of stealing cows. A rustler ain't a rustler till he's caught; then—

The Double W Diamond outfit had been especially preyed on; and day after day an intolerable air dwelt over the hard-working boys of the ranch, whose many duties, running seven thousand head, kept them from centering upon a real, out-and-out combing of the country for the thieves. Yet Tom Hearn, known far and wide as a game man, as the brother of a famous Texas sheriff, afterward a ranger of great renown, held down the activities of the thieves or kept them moving so fast that he was gradually outsmarting them and starving them thin.

Something had to be done to put the fear of the Lord in the grizzled, wiry, successful cowman. The rustlers, after the fiasco at Wagon Mound, determined on a bold stroke; and consequently, when the next pay day came around, and one of the hands was driving up from Chico, with thirty-one hundred dollars in the bottom of the buckboard, he was given a little advice, together with a smack on the brow with a forty-five barrel, and told to high tail back to Hearn and spread the news. And that news was "that if the Double W Diamond didn't get rid of The Riding Kid inside of three weeks, they'd have to plant him where the lilies wouldn't grow."

When this information reached the ranch, all hands were sad; sad, of course, because the old man had lost the pay roll; sad because one of their number had been spotted for bush-whacking warfare; and each of them knew that when a gang of men decides to remove a man, from a primitive country, he is done for. Murder and money robbery had now been linked with insult to a girl and kidnaping. Something had to be done. The Kid was called into a conference, and what he heard drained the blood out of his face.

WORTH, the foreman, noted this; so did Billie Hearn, who sat in on the discussion. Mr. Hearn spoke kindly at the finish.

"I don't like to suggest it, Kid," he said, a tone of warm affection in his voice, "but I'll allow no hand of mine to run the risk of getting killed by sticking to a job for me. You get out, now, and I'll pay you six months' wages in advance; over on the Salado there's a dozen of my friends who'll be glad to take you on."

The Riding Kid caught Billie's eyes. In them there seemed to be the same concern that he had viewed in her father's; it seemed to the boy that he had diced with a beautiful and lovely fate and had thrown a pair of deuces. It seemed that in that small room the only serious concern was for his body. That wasn't what mattered with him. No! It was life! Life and joy and *home!* Home!

The thought suffused his cheeks; swept him with a strange tingling and abashed him so that he stared from face to face, lowered his head, and toyed with the rim of his hat. He dragged a boot carelessly along the floor. Billie was profoundly moved, and so was her father.

"Don't you feel that way, son?" he asked.

"No, sir!" snapped out the Kid. "When a man goes into the cow business he goes with his eyes open and plumb willing to take a little pile of chances. He's smart; or thinks he is. He puts up all he's got; generally, with me, a hoss, a saddle, some rigging, and a gun and a hat, against bad weather, bad riding, bad hombres nearly everything includin' his own cooking and he just figgers he's got the world cheated.

"Now, when he's up agin' the real

thing, and a bunch of low-lived sidewinders, what ain't cute enough to stick a straight iron on a maverick, gets riled agin' a boy, I don't see no call for that puncher to start dusting landscape. I may quit workin' for you; but I'm plumb in love, in all ways, with this country"—here he caught Billie's face and saw her drop her eyes—"and I reckon I'll just hang around and see a little bit more of it."

"But—" began Hank.

"There ain't no buts about that thing, Worthless; for I've made up my mind; and when I've said that, I've uttered and muttered about all there is. I just cain't change my head on them things; too much of my daddy in me, I reckon. I gotta go! And keep on a-going. That's why them Wyoming birds give me that on'ry name!"

Billie started to speak; but The Riding Kid arose and left the room.

Fifteen minutes later and he was out in the road riding toward town. Here, after carefully tying his horse behind a group of buildings, off the main street, he crept to the side window of the Casino and saw Spider Morgan, Kansas Toomey, and four other men seated at a table directly in front of the bar. Loosening the gun in his holster, he walked to the front, tiptoed across its raised walk, flung open the door, and jumped into the room. A sight met his gaze that narrowed his smiling eyes into thin gray slits. Seated with his back to the window, through which he had looked but a moment before, was Snook Lucas, the judge who had jobbed him at Cheyenne.

SPIDER MORGAN'S jaw dropped; Kansas Toomey could only stare; the other men around the table stirred, but as Snook Lucas caught the sight of The Riding Kid's face, his voice sounded like a shriek in the low-ceiled room.

"Don't monkey with that bird, any of you fellows," he yelled. "All he's a-standing there for is to see some iron come across this table. Lord! But he's fast!"

"You said it—all, Snook!" shot out the Kid, "and Morgan's the baby I'm waiting for. Draw your iron, Spider Morgan!"

A hateful, ominous silence dwelt in the room as that command rang in a quiet, deadly tone; only the monotonous ticking of a wall clock could be heard. Then Morgan spoke:

"What's a-eatin' you, Kid?" he asked. "You did pretty fair the other day in the street; let's call it about even."

The Riding Kid laughed.

"Stand up!" he said.

Morgan obeyed.

"You too, Kansas!"

Kansas arose, hands going above his head.

"Now you other birds! Snook, you keep your back to me and pull their irons out of the leather and drop 'em on the floor."

Lucas disarmed the men. Up to this point the Kid's gun had not been touched by a hand; but now, as he moved across the floor toward the row of men, he whipped it out and held it loosely in his right hand.

Deftly, and from the rear, he went through the pockets of the giant Morgan and drew handful after handful of gold coin from his clothes and laid it on the table. Each of the other men was treated in like fashion. This done, he commanded Lucas to count the currency. There was twenty-six hundred dollars in the pile when Snook finished his job.

AT a word from the Kid, the saloon man brought forth a small canvas sack and filled it with the coin, then handed it to The Riding Kid, who

kicked the guns toward a side wall and then walked casually to the door.

Here he caught Morgan's eye and said in a cold-blooded, calculating manner: "You're a-owin' five hundred more pesos to Colonel Hearn of the Double W Diamond. And I'm a-tellin' all of you, so's you can spread the gospel, that I'm in love with this country and figger on eatin' my saleratus biscuits right here, a long time. From now on, and this goes for you, too, Snook, it's start smokin', all of you, as soon as you glim me or my hoss. I rode up here to break that news to you, and it goes just as it lays. I'll drop the first one of you I see ridin', sittin', walkin', or flyin'. And I can do it at a half mile."

Then he closed the door and was gone.

CHAPTER V

Billie's Frame of Mind

WHEN Tom Hearn opened the side door the next morning, he stumbled over a canvas sack. Opening it, he saw the gold and read this note:

DEAR COLONEL: I was up to town last night and Morgan sent this money back to you; said he was right sorry it wasn't all there, but that he'd had a change of heart. I'll see you when I ride up.

THE RIDING KID.

The old rancher reread the message, looked at the sack, and then shouted to his foreman.

"Where's the Kid?"

"I don't know," replied Hank. "He ain't been in his blankets all night, and Rocking Chair ain't in the corral. He got some grub, too!"

Billie's face showed for an instant in a window; it was blanched and drawn. Then it disappeared. In a moment her father heard the sound of her weeping and, entering her room, found her head sunk on her arms and a tiny slip of paper lying on the table before which she sat. He patted her shoulder, gazed at the paper, picked it up, and read:

DEAR MISS BILLIE: This is good-by, I reckon. I'm not exactly out of the country yet, and I don't intend to be for a little while; but what I seen in your eyes last night sure showed me that if I stayed on here I'd just get the heartbreak and maybe make a fool of myself. I've learned something about cows and other critters, but what I don't know about a woman would sound louder than the Declaration of Independence. Just you always remember me as one puncher what thinks a woman like you is sure enough the best thing that walks the old earth. And please don't think of me as The Riding Kid, but when you do think of me, let it be just your friend, JOHN.

The girl felt the hand of her father become still; felt or heard, or somehow sensed, the rush of emotion which swept him as he finished the note; and she raised her face, clutched his arm, and from the folds of his coat, cried: "Oh, father! Daddy! I wish you could understand!"

"There, there, Billie!" he said. "I know! I know, daughter! I wish mother were alive to be with us now."

"They'll kill him!" she shrieked. "They'll kill him! And I couldn't live if they did that. I must see him, daddy! Don't you see? Look at me!"

"Ssssh!" replied Hearn. "I don't have to see! I know how it is!"

CHAPTER VI

Unbranded Cows Missing

CHICO heard of the deed of the Kid; heard that he had made a monkey out of Spider Morgan and his best gunmen; heard everything but the episode of making them see their own gold on the table. That gossip filtered from Morgan's strongholds, out upon the street, was overheard by

Hearn's friends, and so, within twenty-four hours, the tale of reckless bravery was being told in the Double W Diamond Ranch and bunk houses.

Tom Hearn then knew how the gold came to be outside his door the day after the dare-deviltry of The Riding Kid.

Day after day went by and no word was received of the gray-eyed young puncher who had ridden away after his attempt to retrieve the loss of his employer. The hands began to worry; they scouted, as best they could, whenever they were given a distant portion of the range to ride; and they worked as hard as they could in and around the wild bunches, where rustlers were prone to rustle, in the hope that they might have an opportunity to salivate some of the men they believed were the cause of the Kid's departure.

Billie rode everywhere, at all hours of the day and night. She grew morose, silent, spent long vigils on a high rim, in a lower fenced pasture, sweeping the country to the west with a pair of high-power binoculars. And no longer did she discuss the absence of the boy with her father; both seemed to understand the mood and mind of the other.

Then one morning a stray man reported to Worth that four hundred head of unbranded cows that had been moved off the tough grass and on to the upper-feed grounds, had been driven out of the fenced land. And the strange thing of that theft was that when the cows reached the desert, they left no trail.

This bunch was checked up, and it was learned that no man had ridden the grass land, under fence, for at least four days. This meant that the cows had plenty of time to travel a distance sufficient to cause Hearn a lot of worry in tracking them, even though they might have gone to the north, where the railroad lay and where plenty of honest cowmen would have known of such a band of stock moving through the country to cars. If they had gone west, if they had crossed the first waste lands and been secreted in the hills, then indeed was pursuit hopeless, for a dust storm had prevailed over the sand hills for the past three days. Tom Hearn gritted his teeth and took his "medicine" stolidly; but he figured up his loss and approximated it at forty dollars a head, or sixteen thousand dollars in the rough.

The fall round-up was coming on; he couldn't take any of his men off duty now for the purpose of trailing the lost animals, and so he walked among his hands with a grim light in his eyes and no sniveling word on his lips. The hands liked this sort of thing in the old man; they vowed that from now on, one, at least, would do night duty, no matter how hard he might have to work by day. Unknown to the foreman, they selected one of their number and he rode a string of drift fence eight miles long, and he rode it between eleven at night and four in the morning. This routine was maintained for ten days.

AT breakfast one morning the story came out. It had to, sooner or later, and the nighthawk who had just come in told of seeing a strange rider skirting the edge of the prickly pear to the west and resting his horse, from time to time, as though he were looking for some one. When at last he rode within a half mile of the guard, he came out into a clear spot of the pear, and the puncher had recognized Rocking Chair; and a moment later was certain that its rider was The Riding Kid. But when he darted toward the boy, shouting the Kid's name, and waving a hat, the big horse turned and was lost amid the ghostly vegetation of the desert.

The Chinaman cook stopped, as he was passing a platter of eggs to the hands' table, and listened intently to

the news the nighthawk had brought into the chuck house. Within an hour the oriental had imparted the gossip to Billie. And the rest of the day she went singing about the house, much to the amazement of her father.

Preparations for a round-up are distracting; they are concerns as vital to a ranch as getting the navy ready for a war is to a nation; they absorb all else; no matter how grave or important other things may seem to be, the round-up must go on. And at Hearn's ranch it proceeded and distracted the men's minds of all else save their plans, ponies, riggin', and rivalries.

The Riding Kid was forgotten by all save Billie, and she was glad that he was alive. In the woman's heart of her she felt that nothing else mattered so long as he rode under the sun and stars and did not suffer pain. She could stand the separation, now that she knew he was jogging about in the region, somewhere.

At daybreak the first of the remudas started away; two hours later another; and so they went until six had departed in a perfect frenzy of cries and creaking of wood and leather, and a mad rush and clatter of cow ponies, night horses, and circle horses. More than five hundred head of riding stock were kicking up the dust as far as the eye could see, and, following their rear, were rattling wagons, driven by the round-up cooks and special details. Each of these was a bouncing, tearing bedlam of raucous sound. Billie sighed when the quiet of the day fell at last.

CHAPTER VII

The Mexican Talks

FOR many days, high up in the hills to the southwest, as a crow would fly, thirty miles, The Riding Kid lay and watched the long barren lands before and below him; watched from vantage points in that hideous basin at all times of the day and night; but never a rustler did he see. He had often smiled at the thought that perhaps, after all, he had "skeered" that gang of phonies out of the country; but—

One day he found a faint trail where a great bunch of cows had traveled west, from a fence. And locating this, he went back to a small arroyo where there was a cabin, plenty feed for himself and horse, and a kindly old man who had taken him in and offered him a desolate sanctuary. No one alive would think of looking for a home in that burnt spur.

Here he sat and talked out the disappearance of the cows with the old man. They arrived at nothing then. But that night the boy had pondered the thing and decided that Morgan and his gang had stolen the bunch for a purpose; had literally taken it somewhere in order that they might be pursued, and that then a dust storm had suddenly come up to cover the trail that led to a trap.

He concluded this surmise to be a good one, and decided that before the sun arose he'd be riding the pear and taking a slant at that back trail. He figured that if one theft did not bring out the victims, when round-up time was so close, the outlaws would attempt another sally.

It was on this mission that he discovered the Double W Diamond boy trying to edge close enough to him to engage him in conversation, and this was just the one thing he did not want. If folks thought that he was out of the country, that was the very best idea to have broadcast.

Then, for the old man's sake, he didn't want to be trailed to the cabin. There was something strange about that old man, something that was mysteri-

ous and yet lovely, and The Riding Kid had come to care a great deal for him.

Then above all else he knew that if he was to corral this bunch of crooks, he had to get them with the goods and keep the goods on them till he could get witnesses or a confession that would serve as irrefutable evidence in court. He had seen too many rustlers go scot free from being bagged at the wrong time or in the wrong manner. His best plan was to work single-handed, with his horse and his gun and his conscience as his only aids. He wouldn't quit that country till he had cornered and "convinced" at least one of the rustlers that he really was The Riding Kid.

THERE was a sodden feeling about his heart, a sensation of numbness whenever he thought of Billie Hearn, or, for that manner, whenever his thoughts strayed to her father or the Double W Diamond, for this line of thinking invariably led straight to Billie.

She felt sorry that he must flee the country to save his life; she allowed him to leave that room without one little word; she was not the same woman who had seemed to concerned for his safety that night of the attack at Wagon Mound. No sir! He had seen something in her eyes that time. Yes, he had! Something, it was, that stirred up something else in him; something that was strange, and would not now let him be. Lord! How could a woman be like that? How could a girl like Billie look into his face and not read what was written on his heart? She did know! Dog-gone it! She did know! God bless her! And she was a-trying to let him light plumb easy without spraining a leg. That was it! She had read his mind. Dog-gone! Well, he'd stick on the tail of that bunch of cheap beef-stealing snakes till he'd made a name for himself, and then—

He'd leave the country and forget. Forget! Shucks! He'd never forget! The country was too pretty. There was such peace and lovely quiet there; such wonderful soft lights on the horizon; such delightfully wide and charming visions. And even in the winter it was glorious. That was it! Glorious! Why, that was the spot where the sunshine wintered. Huh!

His meditations ceased with a crash. There, far out on the plain below him, he saw a lone horseman tearing over the desert, a small spiral of dust pursuing the feet of his horse. The Kid wondered about that, and at a glance saw that by a rapid ride out of his retreat, and up to Big Blue Mesa, hugging its far edge, he could descend and make the chaparral thicket before the rider could possibly pass the point. He leaped on Rocking Chair and, within a few moments, was dismounted and snubbing his lass rope around the roots of a large mesquite. Through the limbs of the tree he saw the gray bulk of a rider and knew that he was about to pass his covert.

The Kid shook out a small loop, held the coil in his hand, and as the horse flashed by, the lariat settled about its rider and the rope jerked him roughly to the sand. When the man opened his eyes, The Riding Kid stood looking down into his face.

"So," he said. "It's you, is it?"

"Señor!" exclaimed the other. "I am a man of family! Please let me live!"

It was the same Mexican that The Riding Kid had caught branding one of the Hearn cows. That hideous cheek scar, the purple of fear, mingled with the fresh dust and streaks of perspiration, made of the man's face a detestable vision. It became repulsive to the Kid.

"Get up!" he ordered.

THE Mexican arose. The Kid disarmed him; then coiled his lariat, hung it on his front roll, and, driving the greaser before him, caught the riderless horse, now munching tops of the desert plants, and commanded the man to get into the saddle.

"What will you do?" screamed the prisoner. "Tell me! What will you do?"

"Make a good Mexican of you!"

"No! No! No!" the man wailed piteously. "I know you Americans. You say the only good Mexican is a dead one. Let me go! I could make it worth your while."

"How?"

"I could speak! I could tell tales! I could lead you where the important ones are. I am nothing! Just one of the lowly ones!"

"You talk very good Spanish."

"So do you, señor! But will you let me go, if I speak?"

"Talk! I can weigh a Mexican's words like they do wool—when it's clipped and the dirt is out of it."

"Maybe you can read! See!"

He brought forth a paper. The Kid read it at a glance.

Come to San Adolphe day after tomorrow in the middle of the night. I will be at Mariquita's adobe on the skirt of the town.

LUCAS.

"Who?" was the one word spoken by The Riding Kid.

"The Spider!"

"Who sent it?"

"Snook Lucas. He has made preparations to sell and move the Hearn cows over the border into Chihuahua and drive them across at Laredo."

"Where are those cows now?"

"In the Ghost Mountains."

"You lie! There are no walks for cows in those hills. No trails where even sheep could cross the front spurs."

"Señor does not know. In the box cañon, where are the ruins of the ancient cliff dwellers, at the far end, is a break in the wall. Through this, for six hundred feet, so narrow at times that but three cows can walk abreast, is a deep cut. On the other side is a little valley, and beyond this good trails to upper pastures where there are cool spots with plenty grass and water. I have been there many times. But—"

"Yes?"

"At the old ruins, on a tall needle, Morgan always keeps a guard. He is there now. In two hours he would have seen my signal and a man would have ridden to carry this note to the Spider."

"Come clean and tell it all."

"I belong to those who work with Lucas. I was told to take this note to yonder mesa; the one with the castle rock on this end, see, señor?"

"Go on!"

"There, I was ordered to build three fires, of green wood, one hundred feet apart, exactly at five. That would bring a man to receive the message. I was to leave it under a flat rock, on the top of which were seven small stones. Does not señor believe? Look in my eyes! One cannot hide the fright of death when it is in bloom!"

The Kid exulted, glowed with the thought that luck had carried the very means to him which he had awaited. He turned on the Mexican and said in a somber voice:

"It is said in the old Spanish tongue that, 'he who escapes death once, is a luck child; the same fate twice is stupid, but he who risks his neck the third time deserves no funeral.' You sabe,

hombre? Once I had you tied; to-day I find you red with crime. It is the second time now. Will there be the third?"

"No! By the god of my people, by the—"

"Save your breath. And head that horse toward that rise where the long piñon slants to the west!"

"You would take me somewhere to kill me?"

"No, to keep you from being a fool. I have a regard for your wife and littlest ones. Ride!"

WITHIN thirty minutes The Riding Kid and his prisoner jogged down into a little gulch, hidden among the brittle hills, and up to a small cabin beside which sat an old man. Somehow, the sight of the ancient, weather-scarred face stirred memories within the mind of the captive. His eyes bulged; his hands trembled as they clutched his saddle horn, and his throat throbbed visibly.

"Do I not see the man they call 'The Desert Wasp!' The one who came to Guzman many years ago and shot three men in the streets? Are you not he? Are you not The Gray Rider of—"

The old man laughed. "What's the riffle, brother?" he said to The Riding Kid.

"I caught this greaser beating it for Morgan's layout. Read that!" He handed the ancient the letter he had taken from his prisoner. After reading it, the old man said: "You know this Lucas?"

"Top, bottom, and sides. He works for a lota sure-thing ranchers in Wyoming; does their dirty work, and I'm just dead certain all these New Mexico cows slide into Chihuahua, across the Rio Grande, and then up to Wyoming and Montana. We've knocked down a yellow packet's nest on this gang."

"Whatcha goin' to do?"

"Locate them cows; high tail to Chico for help and carry twenty-four-carat grief to them babies."

"The cows are in the Ghost Mountains, I suppose."

"How do you know, old-timer?"

"I know them hills. Beyond the cliff dwellings there is a cañon that leads to fine grass lands."

"I told the truth!" screeched the Mexican. "I told him that! Now, may I go to my family?"

"Not yet!" snapped out the Kid. "We want you, hombre, to tell a little story in a courtroom; maybe two or three little stories, as true as you have spoken to-day. Get down!"

The Mexican leaped to the ground, and the Kid escorted him inside the cabin and trussed him up to a ring bolt sunk in a wall log. After that he sought the old man.

"This note has to be felt on Castle Rock and three smoke signs made. I want to get Morgan out alone and get him away from his men. When I've landed him and brought him here, I'll go after the rest with the sheriff from Chico and the Double W Diamond boys."

"My son, a little after daybreak, as I looked through my glasses, I saw the remudas leaving from that ranch. They were heading to the northwest, and there were many of them. The round-up has begun, and there are no men at the Double W Diamond."

"Then I'll go it alone!"

"Listen, boy! When I was your age I was like you. I went where I wanted to go. I was afraid of nothing. But I've lived in this desert for thirty years, and I know its ways. When Morgan gets that note he will want to reach San Adolphe the quick way, and that is across the Dead Basin. He'll save thirty miles. But—"

THE RIDING KID caught and held the old man's eyes. "But what?" he asked.

"If there comes up a blow, then—he's done!"

"What makes you think there's a-going to be wind?"

"See that yellow light over Thunder Range?"

The Riding Kid followed the index finger of the old man. He nodded.

"You can bank on wind within forty-eight hours, when you see that saffron sky. It never fails. And if you and Morgan are caught out there—"

For a long while the Kid studied the sky, searched the face of the old man. and then spoke:

"Suppose you took the Mexican's horse to-night, stuck two small water barrels on it, and then went out on them two lava beds, out there"—and he swept his hand toward Dead Basin—"and hid that water in them tanks you showed me the time we was out there. Don't you s'pose I could outlast the wind if I was caught?"

"You are strong men, you and Morgan, and I could not tell how long you would survive; but my advice would be not to stir when you reached either bed. If you got there, you would have a chance—that's all—just a chance."

"That's enough! A chance is all I want! You know podner, when I blew into Chico, I seen a sign, and it read:

'Climb! There ain't no elevators in the house of success!'

That thing just changed me—made me as different as a little potash will change the gray hairs on a hoss, or puttin' a hole in a sunk shoulder and blowin' air in it will swell out a hollow. Yes, sir! I seen what various kinds of standard-bred fools I been all my life. Why, I was so stupid at studying, that when I was at school, they had to burn the schoolhouse down to get me outa the fifth grade. Then—"

"Yep," and the old man smiled beautifully, a strange light dancing in his eyes, "then you met a woman!"

The Riding Kid started as though he had been prodded.

"I know the symptoms. And what you've got, is real. I can see it; anybody could see it. I knew what made you come into these hills, the first time I saw you. Do you suppose for one minute I'd have let you stay here if I didn't know it was woman sickness what made you dive into the sand? No, sir! I've kept all men out of this spur. I don't want company. Because—"

"Now I reckon I knows what's ailing you, too!" smiled the Kid.

"Yes!" the old man answered, a throaty tone following his speech, "it was the same with me as it is with you; only my girl was killed. I followed the men to Guzman and shot them like I would snakes; then I came here and hid. I've made this country to be feared; I've ridden these sands on the nights when I knew Mexicans were going to fiestas and would be drunk. I've appeared to them dressed all in white sheets, even my horse. I told the Indians, at Rawhide, Wagon Wheel, Tularosa, that the Dead Basin was exactly as they said it was; that spirits walked across it and would call up the wind when a man went a mile into its sand. I have been free here, till you came.

"AND now, my boy, I know what's wrong with you. But I've learned that you can live down heartbreak; that you can grow sweet and clean in the out of doors and under the moon and stars, and I've learned that God is very close to a man at all times—when man wants to see him.

"Fear! My boy, fear is what keeps

Dead Basin really dead; and fear is what killed my youth and is killing you. If you really got the meaning back of that sign:

'Climb! There are no elevators in the house of success,'

then you've got it all. Now I'm done a-lecturing. You go on and start them fires; and I'll do forty miles between now and sunup. Will you come back here, to-night? Maybe you better."

"I reckon I better."

"Then feed that poor devil inside, and I'll take care of him tomorrow. If you wanted to take a look at Morgan's layout, and it is where this Mex says it is, I could tell you how to drop into that country from the south."

"Now you're sure a-talking. That makes me feel as tickled as if I run a nail in my foot."

"If you slide out after dark, to-night, you can head your horse straight as a bee wings for old Sawtooth, over there, see! It's the middle hump in them lower hills."

"How far you reckon she is?"

"Twenty-six or maybe twenty-seven miles. And it's good going, too. Three water holes with palo verde trees around 'em so's you couldn't miss 'em. When you get to Sawtooth, edge up slantwise, whipping back and forth, and allowing your zigzag to bring you out at the base of a big loose rock slide with a dead pine right in its middle.

"Turn up a little draw full of hackberry and lots of funny little rock dingesses and be careful lest you don't bump and start a roll. For, if you do, you'll die young."

"Well, there's something to that, too. For the young die good, but the old die clever. I and Rocking Chair will just pin back our ears and look out a little. That place I reckon will be just about enough for us to be polite to."

"At the head of that wash you'll come right up agin' a big amphitheater walled on three sides with old Sawtooth's upper rocks. In the middle of this you'll find a decent sort of place where you can climb to the top—about a hundred feet, I reckon. You leave the horse there, and when you're on top you can slide down to a ridge that will let you onto another spur which runs right beside the park where Morgan's cows are feeding. From that height you can see all you want."

"How far is it from the top of Sawtooth to this lookout ledge?"

"Right around four miles; and there's trees every inch of the way. Big pine, too! Some of it three feet thick. Is that horse of yours good enough to make that trip and then take a try at crossing Dead Basin after Morgan?"

"Man, he'd be butter fat if you camped in the saddle from now till Christmas. He's got what I calls a sorta ingrowing endurance. When he runs outa wind, he coughs up a little more."

"Well, you better go ahead, if you want to get that sign started by five o'clock. I'll take care of things around here."

"You'll have them casks in the lava beds?"

"You bet! One, I'll leave at that little *tinaja* where you and me seen that Spanish cross; and the other eight miles south and under the shelf where that old rusty wagon tire is hung on the lava. I'll take two ten-gallon barrels."

The Riding Kid put four feeds of grain in a sack, gathered up some bacon and bread for himself, and set out for Castle Rock. And exactly at five, as the old man was riding into the Dead Basin, he saw three thin, gray-black streaks of smoke arising from the western rim of Castle Rock. He smiled grimly and watched the signal until it faded gradually in the thin air of the dying day.

CHAPTER VIII

Facing a Sand Storm

AFTER starting the fires and depositing the note beside the arranged stones, and weighting it down with one of these, The Riding Kid rode the three miles back to the cabin and, securing paper and pencil, wrote this note to The Desert Wasp:

DEAR FRIEND: It just flopped into my mind that I may not be coming back to this here place. And if I don't then thank you for all you've done for me. And please deliver this note to Miss Billie Hearn, Double W Diamond Ranch.

JOHN CRAWFORD,
"The Riding Kid."

P. S. If I do come back, burn these papers like you would a small-pox bed roll. They're sure death for me alive.

Then followed the second writing, and he labored over this so strenuously and long that the night shadows were falling into the door when he ceased. It read:

DEAR BILLIE: There it is! And I sure had a hard time getting shet of it; but it come out. DEAR BILLIE! And that's it—plumb! I'm going after Spider, and maybe I ain't coming back. If I don't, there's something I want to tell you. It's something that's the cleanest and sweetest part of me as ever cropped up. I LOVE YOU! Lord! If you could see me. There's a Mex hog tied to a ring bolt; and his bad eye, and skeered face, looks like a idle. Or a jinx. Outside a magpie's fussing and a pack rat's moving house in this cabin's loft. Seems everything's making fun of me, but—I LOVE YOU.

I'd never have the gall to look you in the eye and tell it to you; but I've sure did it these last few weeks. Every bush knows it; every dune and palo verde tree and quite a few mock birds, too.

This old-timer, who's going to give you this, he was hard hit, once, and lost his love. He hid out in these slag piles; but he's got a woman's heart in his body and took me in when I wandered this way, after leaving you. Please for my sake come to see him once in a while and don't let him live any longer alone. A love-starved hombre, a dog what's lost his master, and a homesick hawg. Lord! That's a trio. Good-by, and may the fellow what gets you think of you like I would have done if I'd been good enough; but they say when you look too long at the moon you gets moon blind. That's me! I've looked at you so long, and so hard, and so—well, if you knew the nerve of me—you'd have me doing six months three times a year.

Don't feel sorry! I'm a boy what's always a-trying. And I'm going to take a try at bringing in Morgan. If I don't well—there's lots of worse places than out in the clean hot sand.

Because of you, and a little sign I seen, I did want to settle down and gentle myself so's I could do something else but saddle work. You know, Billie, I was a-thinking of maybe training myself to work double! Now ain't I the shameless fool? There it is, though, and now, good-by. No! Not good-by, Just—adios! JOHN CRAWFORD.

P. S. Ain't that a sassy sort of name? Lord! How I loved to hear you say, "Riding!" it was a pretty good old name, at that. "Riding!" But if I could have listened to you a-saying: "Yes, Jack! Yes, Jack!" I could have laughed in the face of fate and sung my song to the whole crazy old shebang. I could have taken a drink of spring water and acted like I had ninety hundred on board.

AFTER folding up the missives he had written he placed them on the table and told the Mexican to tell the old man what he had done. Then he cooked a meal for himself and prisoner, packed two days' grub in a sack and shoved it down on the horse feed, saw that the Mexican had some of the bedding, hooked the door on the outside, swung two large canteens on either side of his pony, and rode away. At a little before midnight he tied his horse at the last climb on Sawtooth and began the ascent to the floor of the ridge above. When the moon dropped out of sight, he was squatting back of a pine tree watching a cluster of lights a quarter of a mile away.

From time to time he heard the night calls of restless cows, or the neigh of a horse, but save for an occasional stream of ascending sparks, the cabins gave forth no evidence of human occupancy. The night dragged; the stars swung and blinked, and then dropped from sight. The night birds, owls, and vagrant mocking birds, cried from time to time; and then came the dawn.

And with the first shell colors of the day, four men issued from a cabin and roped a bunch of horses in a corral and led them up to a pole fence where feed boxes showed. After feeding the ani-

mals, one man rubbed down a tall, white, golden mane and tail horse, and saddled it.

Some one went for a bucket of water, and The Riding Kid understood that breakfast was under way. He tarried till he saw the huge, hulking form of Spider Morgan leave the far cabin door and approach a water trough where the rustler bathed. After that Spider inspected two large canteens, hanging to the cabin wall, and reëntered the house.

That was sufficient for the Kid. After locating the bunch of cattle in the upper feed ground, and recognizing a white-face steer, here and there, as of the Double W Diamond strain, he retraced his steps to Rocking Chair, fed the horse, and ate breakfast himself. Then he worked down the mountain to a cluster of small pine, from where he could sweep the desert for miles.

Not a cloud appeared in the sky. The sun rose higher and higher and the chill of the night gave way to a penetrating heat, which hung in the air like an odor. The Riding Kid smiled; his lips moved, and he patted the head of his horse as he leaned against its shoulder.

"Old Sweetie," he murmured. "I and you ain't, maybe, going to get our hell after all. I don't see nothing that looks like moving air, in them skies, does you?"

AT a little past seven o'clock Morgan and three other riders came out of the trees less than a mile from the spot where the Kid stood watch. And they struck directly, and at that great gait of the cowman, the little fox trot into the edge of the gaunt waste land which stretched as far as the eye could see into the east and to the dim heat-dizzy south.

An hour went by, and The Riding Kid never stirred. Then—from out of the dunes, where he had seen the riders disappear, he saw a spiral of swiftly moving dust. He smiled.

"Ain't they the cute cusses?" he mused. "Went along with Spider to blind his trail when they rode back this way. Ridin' fast and ridin' straight to fling a phony sign like as they was hell-bent-for-home outa that sand. Rocking Chair, if ever you put 'em up and put 'em down, I wants you to do it now, sweetie! And don't mind me. If you bends so low, gettin' around them dunes, that you scoops this rainbow vest's pockets full of sand, that's sure jake with me."

The understanding of that wild beast was a revelation; its ears flicked back and forth in a way which signaled its joy at the sound of the Kid's affectionate tone.

And when the companions to Crawford had reached the trees, and were lost beyond a distant hogback, The Riding Kid and Rocking Chair entered the Dead Basin at a frantic speed, the long, even, machinelike strides of that splendid animal devouring the distance. The trail of the outlaws clearly showed; and they had done their work well. The path of the Spider could not be seen; and one, passing that way, even a trained tracker and trailer, would have sworn that no more than three horses had traveled that route during the past twenty-four hours.

Three miles away there was a spot that showed where ponies had been jerked about on the back trail and here the cowboy tracker had left his saddle. The Kid's eye had caught a piece of sacking, and his hand picked it from the sand. Then, swiftly, he looked among the drifted roots of the desert shrubs and saw where the earth had been disturbed. From the spot he pulled a pair of hoof nippers and four horseshoes. Once more he was in the saddle, following a broad, dull imprint in the sand. Over his face there spread a peculiar smile; it wasn't mirth; it wasn't satisfaction; it was the look of

a wild beast when it nears its quarry.

The Riding Kid, trained to many of the subterfuges of those who have trails to hide, knew that he had discovered Morgan; knew that the man ahead of him had changed the track of his big horse by the aid of hoofs wrapped in gunny sacks, and was leaving a trail that some desert men would have sworn had been made by a wild mustang, whose hoofs, grown to abnormal flatness and size of spread by constant traveling of the sand, had left that sign in the desert.

YET it was a good trail to follow, and the boy, leaning forward, directly over the shoulders of his horse, gave vent to a chuckle as he realized that any pony wearing sacking, and traveling in loose sand, could not hope to outrun the tireless animal whose back he then bestrode. Rocking Chair, after a while, knew that he was pursuing those broad marks in the sand as The Riding Kid gave him his head and let him romp along at that wonderful mile-eating gait.

The sun proclaimed the noon when the Kid halted and, filling his hat from a canteen, allowed his horse to drink. Here he fed Rocking Chair, removed his saddle, and rubbed him down. Then he ate a lunch, rolled and smoked a cigarette, watered his pony the second time, and took the trail again.

Two miles away he came upon a spot where he knew Spider had halted to eat his lunch; but he had not watered his horse. This information cheered the boy.

A jack rabbit darted across the sand ahead of him; then another. Soon he was in the very path of a small army of these long-legged hares that seemed to be frightened, and the boy slowed down his horse, pulling his carbine a bit loose, under his leg, and stared in the direction from which the rabbits had come. He fancied that something moving, off there, had made them change their hiding places. But he saw nothing. Reassured, he urged his pony on to a greater effort; and at three o'clock, after carefully locating Morgan's trail, he turned abruptly as he came to the first of the lava beds where he had instructed the old man to leave a cask of water.

Here he took a long drink and allowed Rocking Chair a small quantity, washing the pony's mouth and face, even wetting a sack and rubbing down his back, under the saddle, with the precious fluid. Not over ten minutes were lost in this delay, and with the canteen now filled, he took up Spider's tracks and fled along them rapidly.

The heat was overpowering; it rained like a fire through which he was riding; it filled the air with images of strange and dancing forms. Mesquite trees, and these were seen only at high rises and vast distances, became fantastical shapes, alive with color and movement. The jagged line of the hills, where he knew the old man sat, were magical in the extreme; and, by the wizardry of the light and heat, hung in the air as though they were a part of some masterpiece of stagecraft. Far ahead and high in the air, he saw a line of cranes; their long legs hanging as they flew; a buzzard wheeled far to the south, in ever-widening circles, and then started on a straight course for the hazy outlines of the southern hills. Of a sudden he turned in the saddle.

A strange quality of air had spent itself upon his cheek. Through the veil of dust, upon his back trail, he fancied he saw other swirls of dust, and these seemed to be following him, pursuing him like playful dogs, for they spiraled along, now behind, then off to either side. He sensed the omen of those lively little things. He knew. He was caught!

Rocking Chair lengthened his stride,

swayed his head from time to time, and evinced all the signs of some vast and formidable portent. The Kid spoke to him; the horse made answer with his ears; and, as they reached a slight rise, from which the desert fell in a slow and smooth slope to a wide and dune-covered area, the outline of a man on horseback hung in the blue and dancing atmosphere. Spider Morgan!

THE RIDING KID forgot the spirals of dust; forgot the strange and fearful actions of his horse; forgot everything but that bobbing, ill-shapen, spectral rider-of-the-air before his vision. Morgan's head and shoulders, now hung lower over the neck of his horse, betokened the terrific ravages of the sun upon that giant's body; the horse was barely moving, it seemed. Certainly it was making no faster time than that of a walk. The Riding Kid could not see the legs or feet of the pony ahead, for the magnification of the rising earth heat blotted these out in a perfect and amazing vignette; but the bodies of the man and beast were highly visible, and these were elongated and hideous in the malformations they assumed under the magic of the sun.

And then Morgan turned in his saddle—turned and stared, and The Riding Kid knew that he had been discovered.

SPIDER didn't wait long enough to indulge in a second look, but whipped a quirt, hanging to a wrist, into the tender flesh of his white horse, and it broke instantly into a fast gallop. The Riding Kid made no movement, evinced no sign that he intended to alter the pace of his mount. But, on the contrary, he allowed the man ahead to lengthen the distance between them as rapidly as he desired. A feeling of exultation ran throughout him; it buoyed his tired sensibilities; it seemed for an instant to distract and cool him. But it was only for an instant; then his mind filled with numbing vagaries; hideous and hopeless imaginings. What if Morgan did get away? What if he got away when the wind struck? Lord! He couldn't allow that! No! He'd have to crowd Spider a little bit! It wasn't much use, now! But—well, he'd have to keep in sight of that hombre.

For the first time that day Rocking Chair felt the gentle pressure of the Kid's rowels, and he sprang into a swift lope. Soon the dancing, up-and-down, up-and-down image of the man ahead altered to a regular outline; it showed clear-cut and mobile. That white horse was indeed doing what seemed to be the utterly impossible—it was raking that sand, gunny sacks and all, at a speed which was amazing. The Riding Kid smiled his admiration at the sight. But Rocking Chair was better; Rocking Chair was doing two jumps to the other horse's one. He'd be on top of him soon!

Morgan was a superb horseman and was giving his pony all the advantage of what horsemanship he knew. He was riding high and slick and keeping the bounce of his great weight from striking the back of his animal as it flew over the sand. At last, and The Riding Kid wondered why he had not done it before, Spider looked back and, with the same turning action, whipped his carbine out of its boot, swung a bit back, and to one side, pulling his off leg up along the stirrup fender and took a careful and well-poised shot at his pursuer. The whirr of that bullet awoke the Kid.

HE saw the tip of the .30-.30 ahead flirt into the air, and discerned that peculiar pumping action of one of Morgan's arms, which indicates to a user of guns that a shell is being jammed home. The Kid couldn't allow

that! He grabbed his own carbine and, as Spider was taking a new position, preparatory to a more careful bead, spoke to Rocking Chair reassuringly, threw his gun to a shoulder, and fired. The white horse half reared in a great leap and fell in a heap. Out of the tangle of flying legs and hoofs, Spider emerged and ran hurriedly to a tangle of dunes and disappeared. The Riding Kid caught up a bridle line and pacified the frightened horse he was riding. Then he settled it to a slow walk and edged it toward a collection of dunes opposite those in which Morgan was hidden.

And as he lowered his eyes, for he could not long withstand a direct gaze into the blinding glare of the land ahead, he followed the long shadow of Morgan's horse, now being cast before it by the westing sun. And as he looked the image on the sand vanished; all images vanished, and the earth gave forth a gray and sickish half tone. It seemed that some wondrous legerdemain had whisked off the blinding glare of the pitiless light. The boy swung about in his saddle and sought the sun. He could not see it. But there, high in the heavens and rolling down upon the earth, as a hawk swoops to its prey, he saw a mass of steel-blue clouds, and they were racing toward the basin with unbelievable speed.

The Riding Kid did not hesitate. He leaped from the saddle, emptied the train sack of lunch and feed, slit it with his knife, and, wetting it with the canteen, drew it over the face of the horse, covering the nostrils and eyes and shoving it under the head-stall and tying it securely with tie strings jerked from out their leather rosettes. Then he tied the other portion of the sack about his own face, after wetting it thoroughly. And then came the wind, and with it the sand. He mounted, and went ahead. He had no great fear that Morgan would take a pot shot at him, for Morgan would not be able to see even as well as he could, protected as he was with the gunny sack.

CHAPTER IX

Blind

THE desert awoke to a vastitude of screaming sounds; it seemed to breathe, in one gigantic exhaust, just before the storm struck; and then this sigh or sob, changed to sounds the like of which The Riding Kid had never conceived.

Rocking Chair quailed under the stinging impact of the driving sand, winced, and bowed his back before the onslaught of the gale. In the darkness, dwelling beneath that sopping sack, the resolute animal trembled with a hideous fright. Twice only had a cover been placed over its eyes, obscuring the welcome light. Once when that man on its back had cinched its first saddle, and this time, when it stood in some spot filled with strange and torturing wails and under the horror of a terrifying darkness. But those companionable legs were pressing its sides; that gentle voice had spoken kindly to it when the blind was drawn over its face, and no harm could come to it—this it knew—when *that* man was on its back.

Occasionally The Riding Kid would lift the wet jute from his face, and through drawn lids peer into the region over which he traveled. Once, through some quirk of the sand storm, he fancied he saw the dunes. They seemed to be dancing; to be cavorting about like marionettes pirouetting behind a curtain of gray netting. He lost sight of them as mysteriously as he had seen them. On he went, Rocking Chair now being driven before the wind with such

force that the brave beast assumed the same contorted actions employed when descending a steep hill. Sand went by both rider and horse, ground high, knee high, face high, in sheets, ribbons, and pockets; and it stung like flying needles.

Then some object collided with The Riding Kid's left leg, and in that collision there was all of the vagueness of the supernatural, the intangibility of the unknown, the sweeping denudation of mind and senses. A shudder ran through his frame; he involuntarily winced and felt Rocking Chair plunge aside. And as he settled himself in the saddle seat, at the swift side lunge of the horse, a strange and fearsome voice came out of the wail of the wind.

"Help!" it cried. "Oh! Kid! Don't leave me here to croak, like this."

Then there was silence! The Kid stopped. Only an instant did he hesitate; then he dropped out of the saddle and, wrapping the bridle lines about his arm, shouted.

"Where are you, Spider?"

No answer! Only the shriek of the wind and the needle dust of grit driving even through the interstices of the sack.

"Hey Spider!" he yelled.

A weak, strange sound seemed to come from the earth at his feet, and, jerking the blind from one eye, he saw a shadowy figure wobbling toward him. It was Morgan, and he was propelling himself over the earth on his hands and knees, while the wind was hurling him with a peculiar shifting motion which gave to his gait that of a walking ape. The Riding Kid reached the form with a foot, and Morgan grasped it and pulled himself to a standing posture. The men now stood side by side, both fiercely clutching a stirrup fender, their hands touching the while.

"How you makin' it?" yelled the Kid, balancing himself against the impact of the wind and outlining Morgan through the merest opening of one eye.

ONLY a sputtering of sound came from the rustler; then the Kid boldly moved and stared into Spider's face. The man was literally gasping for breath, and his eyes were wide open; wide open and full of sand.

Holding his breath and closing his eyes, The Riding Kid whipped off the wet sack from his face and with it covered the mouth, nose, and eyes of the suffocating man at his side. Morgan seemed to come back strong. And after an instant the Kid heard him say: "I c'n breathe, now."

"Where's your neckerchief?" asked The Riding Kid, and in answer Morgan pulled a long blue neckscarf out from under the band of his shirt collar and attempted to untie its knot. The Kid took the blue silk from his fingers and pulled the simple tie apart; then he wet the kerchief and, sipping a mouthful of water slowly handed the canteen to Morgan.

"Drink!" was all he said. The giant raised the can to his lips and succeeded in cleaning his throat. When he handed the container back to the boy he said with a loud voice: "I'll tell the world you're one white hombre!"

"How'd it hit you?" returned the Kid, his ear now close to the face of the outlaw, as he tied the scarf over his face.

"All in a lump," replied Spider, "and I was down and full of sand before I knew what had happened. I tried to turn into the wind and got a sight of your horse just before my eyes were filled with sand and my throat closed. Then you bumped me. It's my eyes now. If I could only shut 'em or if they was to quit smartin'. But as she is now, I'm plumb gone. Whicha way shall we go?"

There was no longer in The Riding Kid's mind any thought of this man's crime or his capture. He did not consider the right or wrong involved in

Morgan's past. His only concern was how he was to beat that wicked, wild thing there, at both their sides—that evil thing that howled and carried mobile death in its millions of flying dust specks. The gladiator arose in him. He did not think of self; nor did the first law, so-called, of nature rear itself or its subtle suggestions to his mind. He was filled with an overpowering desire to get away from that spot; to keep going, on and on, and carrying Spider with him. And so he stuck his face to the ear of the rustler and shouted.

"Can you walk?"

"I can't move a step, yet; maybe, in a little while. Let's wait just a minute," came the answer.

"We can't wait. The sand's near knee high around us already. All we're a-doin' is makin' drift catches outa our legs."

"What'll we do?"

"If I let you ride, will you behave?"

"Lord!" was all Morgan said. "I'm done! My guns is gone!"

"Get up then!" shouted the Kid. "And I'll hang onto a latigo."

MORGAN tried to pull himself into the saddle, but he was too weak. The Kid reached a hand to an armpit and hoisted the giant on the back of Rocking Chair. Then he spoke to the horse, and, still hanging to the bridle lines, he followed the pony stumblingly. The moments dragged; Rocking Chair halted twice and flung his head high in the air, retched as though in pain, and the Kid, sensing the difficulty, raised the gunny sack and with a finger dug wads of caked sand from the pony's nostrils. The horse plowed into the dunes again and again. At last The Riding Kid wrapped the lines on the horn.

How long they traveled or how they went, the Kid never knew; that demoniacal roar of the wind in his ears, the stifling quest for breath every instant, was an enterprise that drove every other faculty out of his mind. Nor did he pay heed to the man above him whose leg he felt bobbing against his side.

Then he heard a great roaring in his ears, and, as unconsciousness was about to overwhelm him, he reached a hand beneath the silken fabric flapping about his face and pulled the sand plugs from his nostrils. After that, no matter how hard he was beset to keep his feet, one hand was ever used to hold down the neckerchief so that the flying sand could not too quickly fill his nose.

Rocking Chair lurched against him; one of his hind feet stepped on the puncher's boot, and the Kid realized that the instinct of the horse had impelled it to change its course. He clung tenaciously to the latigo, and the pony began a pace which literally pulled the dragging boy over the sand, and then—

There arose the sound of iron-shod hoofs clicking against some hard surface. The Riding Kid dropped one corner of the scarf and there, right in front of him, he saw a ghostly form; it loomed through the clouds of flying grit like the bulk of a boat.

His heart pounded in his throat; his legs grew weak; a great light danced before his eyes, and then he saw a black circle and heard the metallic ring of iron. He knew! The old rusty wagon tire!

Rocking Chair had dragged him to the south edge of the lava bed where the old man had placed the second cask of water.

The Kid was now sure of his ground. He untied the lines from the pommel and literally leaped ahead of the pony and dragged it around the swaying figure of the tire and into the shelter of a high black lava shaft. Here the wind sped by with a roar like that of the sea; but its drive was gone; no longer were

the stinging needles of pain sinking into the flesh. Rocking Chair, when he felt the release from the wind, stood still trembling, and then, in a state of exhaustion, sank slowly to earth.

Spider would have been caught under the horse had not the Kid swung his leg up and out of the way. The blind giant careened in a futile effort to gain his feet, lurched, and fell upon his face.

The Riding Kid hastily pulled the sack from his pony's eyes and with the canteen washed the animal's face, wiped out its nostrils, and let it drink from his hat; and under this treatment the pony revived, raised its head, and struggled to rise. The Kid held it down, and it remained at full length, eyes closed, ribs heaving under the effort of its recent exertion.

SCARCELY able to stand himself, the boy found the tinaja—natural tank—and in its center saw the cask of water and under it a piece of tarpaulin folded into a small mass. Securing the canvas, he hurried back to the fallen man and horse and, pulling Spider close to Rocking Chair, covered both their bodies with the tarp; then he brought the cask and two sacks, which had been used to prevent splashing, and placed the water outside the shelter.

Arousing the rustler and bathing his face, he gave him all the water he could drink. His thirst satisfied, and a great weakness assailing him, Spider lay back, covering his face with a fresh sack.

Finding some huge pieces of the lava, The Riding Kid carried them to the canvas and placed them around its edges to prevent the wind from blowing the tarp away. Then he crawled under the cloth, laid a hand on Rocking Chair's head, spoke to the pony, and fainted.

When he came to, Rocking Chair had arisen and was standing in the shelter of the face of the shaft; beyond the lava formations there came the sough and grunt of the wind. But its intensity was gone; the storm had worn itself out, and a star or two could be seen flicking through flying scuds of clouds. The Kid looked at his watch as he lit a match and found the hour to be two thirty. He had been unconscious at least six and one half hours. Frequently, during the remainder of the night, he gave small amounts of water to his pony and bathed the face of the unconscious man at his side.

When the day dawned, he had made preparations to move out of the lava as soon as possible. And as he was staring around the black ruins of volcanic stone, his eye fell upon a gunny sack, some distance from the spot where the cask had been found. It showed a bulky content within it, and when the boy had jerked it from the stone, he found it contained a quantity of cold biscuit, some bacon, and a small bottle of whisky.

With the stimulant he partially revived Morgan, succeeded in making the man eat a little food, and made him understand that the storm had passed and that he was now about to attempt a trip to a place of safety.

Spider made no comment. His eyes were swollen and protruded; the lids remained open, and the pupils stared with ghastly effect always straight ahead and high. His suffering must have been intense, but he made no moan; said nothing; but with the assistance of the cowboy, he mounted the pony and was tied in the saddle with the lass rope.

Looking across the desert The Riding Kid found a hill outline which he knew to be close to the old man's cabin, and, setting himself at the shoulder of the horse and hanging to its mane, The Riding Kid urged the pony into the sand.

HE estimated the distance to the cabin, on a sheer, direct line across the waste, to be ten miles. His muscles were beginning to jump; twice cramps came into the calves of his legs, and a twitching arose in his upper eyelids.

Yet he maintained an even pace with the horse and held as firm a course toward his destination as the dunes would permit.

Many times, as the morning passed, he was compelled to stop Rocking Chair and rest; his strength was going from him with fierce rapidity. Each onward movement, in the soft footing, brought an exquisite agony to his exhausted body; yet his mind said "go on!" and forward he went.

The sun poured down a fiendish white glare into the burning sand; Spider became a babbling maniac. The water in the canteens was hot and did little to slake the Kid's thirst, and he more often used it to swab out Rocking Chair's mouth than to partake of it himself.

He knew from the shadow at his feet that he had traveled less than four miles in seven hours; the shadow proclaimed the hour to be noon. Four miles! The thought stung him like a whiplash! He raised his face and stared at the distant mountain which was his one hope, and as he looked, it faded; appeared and faded once more.

He shielded his eyes both from the light of the sky and the glare of the sand by using a hand under and over them; the hill was seen—then vanished. His lips uttered a groan; a half-choked sob it was, that quickly died in his parched throat.

He stared at his feet—and could not see them.

Then a sharp, fiery pang shot into his brain from his right eye. It seemed he could not endure this; the agony was excruciating. He rubbed the afflicted orb, and as he drew away his fingers, the left eye set up a series of sharp striking pains that reached far back to the base of his brain.

"I'm blind!" he shrieked. "Oh! Lord! I'm blind!"

OUT of the stillness of the burning waste there rang the satanic laughter of Spider Morgan. Then his voice sounded, sharp and high-pitched and filled with a dissonance that was numbing to hear.

"Blind is you? He! He! He! Whatta you think this is? And who does you think you is, anyhow? Blind, huh! Me, too! Blind as a bat an' dry as a bone. But they ain't no pain no more! No pain, podner! You'll get that a way, too, after a while. Look at me an' I'll look at you—an' nary one'll see a thing."

"Don't! Don't!" yelled the Kid.

"He! He! He! Well, then, I'll sing," and he did.

Old Man Trouble told me to slide,
But I raised the devil, threw the chunk inside,
I'm wicked or willin' with the worst or best,
An' romp, as I will, on the cock-eyed West.

The song seemed to drift off into a faint and screeching echo. The Riding Kid sensed that unconsciousness was about to assail him, and, feeling of the rope about the body of Morgan, he tightened a leg and drew a little slack a half turn about the horn, then tied the bridle lines around his wrist, and lay down on the sand.

When next he knew his surroundings, a chill had superseded the heat and a heavy wheezing sound above him told of Morgan's unconscious repose. The boy clambered to his feet and was trying to shove the heavy figure of Spider back into the saddle when he heard a crunching of sand close by and a voice shouting: "T h a n k the good Lord, señor, I have found you."

With that cry of deliverance ringing in his ears, he fell against the body of his horse and slipped to the sand.

CHAPTER X

To the Rescue

EARLY the morning after The Riding Kid left, the old man set out for the Double W Diamond; the night before he had read the note the boy left for him and somehow he was impelled to make of the opportunity offered, the opening wedge in solving the mystery of the boy's sorrow. He arranged food and water for the prisoner and at the man's earnest entreaty loosened the ropes a little to allow of some movement. In doing this he inadvertently permitted some considerable slack, which is always a means to freedom from rope thongs.

When he rode up to the ranch, Billie met him at the corral bars, and swiftly he told of the mission The Riding Kid was on and his fears for his safety.

Then he gave her the note and watched her face as she swept it with her eyes; watched the glorious color of her youth fade and blanch her cheeks; saw it sweep back a flood of crimson that made her a charming sight. Then she raised her face to his.

"Do you know what he wrote?" she asked, almost pleadingly.

"No'm!" he said, a hurt tone in his voice. "He folded it, and I reckon he wanted no one to see it but you."

"Forgive me," she spoke quickly. "Of course you don't know. It sounds as though he expected to die out in the sands."

"He didn't want you to have it unless he did."

"And you brought it—anyway!"

"Ya'as'm! Something's terrible wrong with him, and I thought, if you was a friend of his'n, you had oughta know. He's eatin' out his heart. Did you two young people quarrel?"

"Quarrel?. No! He went away because dad wanted him to leave this country to keep Morgan from killing him. He's a very brave man, and, at times, I think a very daring one. Why," and here she looked away to the south, "I thought a lot of him; but he didn't know it."

"Young and foolish! Young and foolish! But I think you should get some of the neighbors out and round up them rustlers over in the Ghost Mountains. Lord! Look, ma'am!"

BILLIE turned her head and saw a long low horizon cloud rolling over the rim of the world out where the west edge of the desert appeared. Her cheeks went white, and as she swung her head back to the face of the old man a wondrous flare of light leaped into her eyes. It startled the old man; it conveyed to him the impression that some vast desperation had entered the girl's mind. She looked like a mother who hears that her child is in a burning building, and is on the verge of rushing to its rescue; irrespective of consequences.

"The storm!" she said, slightly above a whisper. "When will it break?"

"In less than three hours."

"Wong!" the girl cried, turning to the cookhouse door.

The Chinaman appeared.

"Come here," she commanded, and the oriental ran to her side.

"The Kid is off there, in the path of *that,*" she said, and she swung a hand toward the desert. "And over in the Ghost Mountains, remember now, Ghost Mountains, right up the draw above the cliff dwellings, Morgan and his gang are hiding with the bunch of four hundred they stole from dad. I want you to ride over to the FF Quarter Circle and round up as many hands as you can, and then ride to Chico and get the sheriff and more men and tell them to get to Morgan and his crowd.

I'll go after dad and our hands and I'll be in those hills, see! Way out there to the south! Out there where that Sugar Loaf Hill is just sticking over the horizon."

"Wong savvy you, missie. Me go!" and away he pattered.

"I'll get my father and some of his boys and we'll come to your cabin and be ready to take up the search for—Jack!"

"Ma'am," suggested the old man, "I reckon, if it's just the same to you, I'll stick around here till you get back. I kinda want to be with you when you come to my place. You folks might lose your way, in the dust."

"All right, make yourself at home. Do you think I better ride by the doctor's house and have him meet us here this afternoon?"

"It mightn't be a bad thing to do."

"Good-by!"

"Good-by, girl! I reckon when that boy sees the light in your eyes that I see, he'll think somebody pried open heaven. But, wait a minute; I was forgetting!"

With trembling fingers the old fellow brought out the note that The Riding Kid had written him and called Billie's attention to the provisional postscript.

"You see what he ordered me to do, in case he come out of the sand? How'll you explain that to him?"

"I won't try to explain it. I'll start right in and take charge of that boy as soon as I see him. And never, never, as long as he lives, will he— Oh! you men! All of you need mothers!"

"You're mighty, mighty wise for your years."

"That isn't wisdom, that's just common sense, and, and—"

"Self-protection," interpolated the old man.

Billie ran toward the stable just as the Chinaman galloped from the yard, his sandals flapping in the stirrups.

CHAPTER XI

Spider Reforms

IT was nearly midnight when the owner of the Double W Diamond, seven of his men, the doctor, Billie, and the old man reached the cabin in the hills alongside of the Dead Basin.

On the table the old man found this note written in Spanish:

SENOR: The storm came, and I knew your young friend was caught. So, after a very hard working of the ropes, I released myself. At nine o'clock I loaded one of your burros with food and water; and am now about to ride my horse and drive the burro into the desert. I shall try to reach both lava beds. As a child of the sand, I know what such a wind means, and I want to help that man who gave me my life. PEDRO.

Toward morning two of the boys from the Double W Diamond rode up and announced that the sheriff and FF Quarter Circle hands had rounded up the rustlers and that other of the Hearn punchers were starting the drive of the four hundred cows back to the ranch. He also announced that the six men Morgan had defeated in the saloon at Chico were on their way to the cabin, and had sworn they would take the law in their own hands as soon as they set eyes on Spider.

Tom Hearn then determined that, come what might, he and his men would go out into the basin to search for the Kid; and, accordingly, they left, alone, immediately after breakfast. The old man was unable to follow them.

All morning Billie sat on a high hogback sweeping the desert with her glasses. She saw her father swallowed in the dunes, magically.

Just at five o'clock she made out her father's party returning, and it was alone. The Riding Kid had not been found. And then far off to the south, in the very center of a mirage, she saw a trio of blazing dots.

THE heat of the day was gone from the air when the Double W Dia-

mond hands, who had swerved to the south and brought in the exhausted men, caught sight of a band of horsemen, riding down the gulch; these they recognized as FF Quarter Circle hands.

Spider Morgan and the Riding Kid had been placed on the floor of the cabin, and the doctor was about to give his attention to the Kid when the latter, his eyes horribly inflamed, told him to treat Morgan first.

In the heart of Billie there leaped a gladsome emotion for the unselfishness of the boy, and yet she said nothing. From the very first sight of the rescued men to the time when The Riding Kid waved the doctor to Spider, the girl had held no conversation with the Kid. Some vast and formidable reticence seemed to have her in its power. All she could do was to stare at the drawn and haggard face of the boy, with its sightless and protruding eyes.

Just as the doctor was about to administer first aid to the rustler, the leader of the FF Quarter Circle boys stepped into the room, six other men crowding the door back of him.

"There ain't no use of that, doc," said the man. "He'll not be a-needin' nothin' but a spade in a little while."

Then the voice of The Riding Kid rang throughout the room. All eyes turned toward it. The Kid was on his feet, and his long black bone-handled six-gun was out of its holster.

"Wait!" he screamed. "I cain't see a thing; but I've sure located a bouquet of you babies; an' I'm a-sayin' that the first man as teches Spider will cause this gun to bark. An' where I shoot, or how, makes no difference. Morgan's a new man! Hear me!"

A murmur ran through the FF Quarter Circle crowd. Its leader spoke:

"He dasn't unhook that iron."

Billie Hearn darted to the Kid's side and spoke to him. "It's Billie, Jack," she said. "Give me that gun!"

The large Colt fell into her hand.

"Get out! Get out! You contemptible beasts," she screamed. "Get out!"

THEY hesitated, then backed from the room, and as they came into the air, the Double W Diamond boys had them covered and compelled them to mount and ride away.

"It's all right, Spider," said the Kid. "You're shore in the hands of friends. Tell Colonel Hearn what you told me."

Tom Hearn stepped forward. "What have you to say, Morgan," he said.

"I was allowin' that when I get out from doin' my bit, I'd like to ride for your outfit. You see, that air Kid just smacked me plumb center; an' since thay's that kinda breed runnin' loose, I'd like to amble alongside of 'em."

"Father," said Billie quietly, "if John suffered so much and—and—"

"Never mind," returned the rancher, "the only reason you got that idea is because you are *my* child. I'll do it! Morgan, when you get so's you can slip a leg over a saddle, you'll ride for me. And when I get to town I'll see that your boys have an opportunity to get out of this country. And as for you, Kid, I'll see that you get paid in full."

The Riding Kid swayed, put out his hands, clawed at the air, and would have fallen had not Billie caught him and eased him gently to the old man's bed. Eyes turned away, men left.

"My man!" she said. "My man! Go to sleep; and when you get well, I want to hold your hand and walk with you into the sun."

"Lord! Miss Billie—Billie! Out there I thought I was all killed but the amen! Now, why— Dog-gone! I've just been born."

His head dropped. He became immobile. Some manner of repose settled over his features. Love had put to sleep that indomitable spirit which the desert and the sun could not vanquish.

When Lawmen Die

by ED EARL REPP *Author of "Don't Bushwhack an Owlhooter"*

Truly, a ghost stalking along Caprock's dusty main street could have created no more stir than this grim-faced, gray-haired gent's sudden appearance. "Scott McCord!" one grizzled oldster husked, "an freighted to the hocks fer war!"

CHAPTER I

Double Gunned Orders

MEN along Caprock's dusty main street saw the tall, grim form of Scott McCord striding down the boardwalk with measured steps, and looks of blank amazement claimed them as they recognized him. For a moment all movement seemed suspended as they watched him, the clomp of his spike-heeled boots on the walk the only sound, his long, iron-gray hair glistening like tarnished silver in the sun.

"It's Scott McCord or his spook!" exclaimed a grizzled oldster on the mercantile porch.

Another echoed: "An' he's freighted down to the hocks fer war. Hell's gonna pop, pronto, or I don't remember ever seein' him with his hackles up!"

If McCord heard those remarks as he passed within arm's length, he gave no sign. Truly, a ghost stalking along the street could have created no more re-

action than his sudden appearance in town. He moved on mechanically, his blocky shoulders hunched a bit forward, his slate gray eyes fastened with deadly fixation on the front of Doc Putter's office. Faces once familiar to him went unnoticed. He recognized one thing only . . . a dead body lay in the coroner's rear room . . . new salt on his long unhealed wounds . . . accrued interest on an old debt yet to be paid in blood.

A heavy hand fell on his shoulder as he started to enter the coroner's office, biting deeping. McCord straightened irritably at the touch and lifted his eyes. Slip Moreau met his red gaze calmly, his swart face etched deeply with lines of cruelty.

"Ghosts can't walk in this town, McCord," the breed gunman said unctuously. "Big John's orders. Now git!"

Scott's shoulders squared and his broad hand pushed stiffly against Moreau's hairy chest, shoving him back. A flush of anger deepened the tan of the breed's hard face.

"To hell with Big John's orders!" Scott's voice was metallic. "You're blockin' my way, Moreau, an' I'm tellin' you tuh git!"

Slip's hand dropped carelessly to the butts of his tied-hard guns. Old memories stirred McCord. Big John Carver still gave orders for others to keep. He still ruled through the ruthless power of hired guns . . . such as those of Slip Moreau's. And as always, there was but one way to edge by John Carver's demands.

"Stand aside or shuck your guns!" Scott clipped at Moreau, his voice even more deadly. "I'm goin' into that office an' you ain't stoppin' me!"

Slip stood his ground uncertainly for an instant and what he saw in McCord's angry face warned there would be no stopping him with anything less than bullets.

"You are like hell, McCord . . ." and he was snatching for his guns, his hands brown blurs as they scooped.

Scott McCord's gun seemed to leap into his fist with machine-like precision. He fired in the same manner and Moreau's face twisted with the shock of lead into his brisket. Impotently his guns exploded into the boardwalk and he dropped woodenly to Doc Putter's front steps.

NO trace of emotion crossed McCord's face. There was no reaction within him. He had an errand. All that he lived for was in it. A man had stopped his way and that man had died. His leonine head tilted down to look at him and there was scorn in his gaze. Years on the out trail had robbed him of any respect for men like Moreau. He was satisfied with one thing . . . years hadn't taken his old gunswift. He would have need for that from here on out, he told himself silently.

An insatiable yearning to see the youngster he had left behind years before, gripped him as he turned to the door. Like an old lobo trailing back to the hunting ground of his cub days he had drifted back to Caprock. That Big John Carver still played his greedy game for power in rangeland politics meant little to him now. In the coroner's office lay the body of young Sheriff Jim McCord . . . Scott's son. He had heard the news from a passing rider outside of town, and had pieced together the fragments of gossip. Now he knew why Big John had done it, almost how. Just another lawman gone the way of Carver's greed for power here.

Jim was dead! The thought woke an empty echo in Scott's shaggy head, stirring out of ten years of restlessness an old hatred and a fighting recklessness. With his gun still smoking in his hand, he shoved into the office, heard the gasps of Doc Putter and the citizens gathered

there. But McCord's interest was in the sweat-beaded young sheriff sprawled limply on the operating table.

Young Jim was *not* dead . . . yet. But Scott's range training told him he soon would be. The face was colorless, stricken with the cold grip of slow death. Scott McCord's eyes wetted, glazed. A heavy, tearing sigh shook his aging body. As the youngster saw his stone-like face his lustreless eyes brightened through his fever.

"Dad!" he choked. "You've come to see me!"

Scott took his cold hand, shook his head slowly. "No, son . . . not like you mean. A sheriff an' a wanted man can only talk through bars. Reckon I don't care fer your jail more'n any other, an' I ain't aimin' tuh try it out. I'm here on business."

"But that old charge agin you has been dropped, Dad," Jim husked through bloody foam. "I looked up the facts an' found you was innocent. It was . . . was . . ."

His impoverished body wracked under a spasm of coughing. Doc Putter shook his head. "He's goin' fast," he murmured to Scott. "Got three slugs in the lungs."

"From behind!" Scott's eyes grew bleaker, and he waited for Jim to speak again. "Who did it, son?" he asked at length. "Who did it . . . John Carver?"

A murmur swept the room and Scott's mind travelled back through the years again. Once he had lived the straight and narrow before the scheming of another had sent him on the road to hell, a price on his head. He had remained away, tried to have Caprock forget him so that young Jim could mature without the stigma of an owlhoot sire and grow to affluence here. Now, all the bitterness of those years gripped him as he felt the pulse grow weaker in the cold hand of his son. The eyes were hollow now as Jim looked up, almost unseeing.

"Thanks for comin' in, Dad," he gasped. "It's tough . . . dyin' like . . . this just when I was . . . fixin' to put the deadwood on the guilty gents . . ." his voice trailed off into nothing.

"Who?" Scott's lips brushed the youngster's ear as he spoke, but there was no response. Jim McCord's borrowed time was up. His body stretched out and slackened. The young sheriff of Caprock was dead. Suddenly Scott became acutely aware of the men about him. Some he had known in the old days. Doc Putter's kindly face was etched with lines of sympathy. But the faces of some of the others, a newer breed in Caprock, were tighter, even hostile.

Almost blindly McCord turned to the door and stepped into the street, sure that at least two of the men in that office were Carver's gun agents. And they could not have missed seeing the death of Moreau from the front window.

Outside, the air was fresher and his senses cleared rapidly. He wondered why the gunmen inside hadn't taken up Moreau's fight to keep him from seeing his dying son. Patently, Jim had wanted to tell him something and he knew now why Moreau had been planted there in front . . . to keep him away till the youngster had breathed his last. By some grapevine, Carver had known of his coming. He was sure of that now.

A crowd of morbid citizens scuttled for cover when they saw Scott emerge. The body had been removed, but a pool of brownish blood marked the steps where it had lain. Yet no hand was raised against the gunman's nemesis, but Scott knew he wouldn't have long to wait. Big John put his machinery of death into motion fast when he started. He would start it grinding again.

SCOTT thought of Jim's problems here. The youngster hadn't yet learned that the life line is longer when you follow the course of least resistance. Young Jim had found something important and had taken the bull by the horns, going against Big John. It was an old story and it had been read to him, Scott, years before. But in a different way. He had been a thorn in Carver's side.

McCord swore savagely under his breath as his bleak eyes shuttled up and down the street. Jim wouldn't take Carver's orders and had sealed his doom for his stubbornness. He wouldn't be driven to nocturnal trails like he had been. Jim had stayed to fight back and had lost. Scott realized that at any moment now the wolves of Big John would come yapping from his office up the street. For he had just killed Slip Moreau, a right bower. Beside, there was no room in Caprock for a McCord. That much was plain now.

He looked down at his right hand. It still clung to his six gun and he hadn't known it. His hand felt weak now, the wrist weak. It seemed that in the past few minutes the years had piled up on him, weakened him physically and mentally. He sighed and with a motion of resignation, dropped the worn weapon back into its pouch. His shoulders slumped and his steps dragged as he moved stolidly toward his horse. His head felt empty and his whole body sick. He needed a drink and there was raw liquor in his saddle bags.

But he had not gone a dozen yards toward the livery stable when a voice, taut with agony and grief reached after him.

"Dad McCord!" came the cry.

CHAPTER II

Blood Challenges

SCOTT pivoted slowly. The young woman was just coming through the gate of Doc Putter's modest little bungalow adjoining his office. She came running toward him. He stared at her in uncertainty and saw that she was young and, despite the lines of suffering etched on her delicately rounded face, she was beautiful. Then he remembered and took a step toward her.

"You weren't leaving, were you, Dad McCord?" the girl spoke huskily and as she drew up he saw that her eyes were red-rimmed from crying.

"I dunno," he murmured, "what I was goin' to do, ma'am. I just came from seein' my boy die. Reckon maybe I'm jest kinda shocked senseless."

His eyes searched the girl's face and he realized that here was another pride that had been denied him through the years of Big John's rule of Caprock. When he spoke it was with another stab of pain.

"You're Molly, ain't yuh?" he said. "Heard Jim'd got married."

Molly nodded wordlessly, tears welling afresh in her dark eyes.

"Reckon I missed a sight of things, bein' gone from Caprock so long. Is there anything I can do?"

It sounded so hollow, that question, and McCord's eyes dropped from her condemning stare.

"Scott McCord," she charged throatily, "folks have called you a worthless old renegade without enough nerve to side your own family in the troubles that have been Jim's! You let John Carver run you out of town and you kept silent all these years while he was hounding your own son into his grave! But two people have always remembered you as Caprock's best sheriff.

That was Jim and me. Now you want to know what you can do. You know what Jim would have done. You must know what he was trying to do here . . . something that you failed to do or didn't have the nerve to keep on doing . . . Peace and Law for this town, and in the end, breaking John Carver's stranglehold on the county! Jim is dead, but the job is still there! Take it, Dad, and don't stop till every killer in that pack is dead or behind bars!"

Scott looked down at his battered boots. The toe of one was entirely worn through. Suddenly he was aware of his shabbiness, aware of his shaking hands and the age that had suddenly caught up with him. Surely this girl knew he had gone to seed, that he was no longer capable of fighting men like John Carver and his killers.

"No," he said hollowly. "No, girl. I'll cut wood for you up to the place. Might even rassle some groceries if somebody wants a fence line run. But this is Big John's town. Let him worry about lawin' it."

A fresh hurt, a deeper torture swept Molly's face. Her hands clenched and her full lips thinned. Dry-eyed now, she stared incredulously at Scott, almost disgustedly. Then the look was swept away by something that might have been understanding.

"Jim never made a mistake in a man, Dad," she murmured. "Least of all . . . you. Always he believed you'd come back and help him clear your name and clean up Caprock. As a little girl I can remember you as the bravest man I knew. I'm banking on Jim's judgment. The fight is still here . . . waiting. You'll fight. The blood of your son will make you . . . give you courage. You can't let him down, Dad McCord."

She swung away then and walked to her buckboard in front of Doc's. He watched her drive northward out of town, a proud, courageous figure facing a world now crushed, with a level, uncompromising gaze. Jim had done well when he married that girl, he thought as he stroked his grizzled chin with steadying hand.

A man was waiting at the tierack for Scott when he came up for his horse. He was thin and wizened with a mane of white hair and sharp blue eyes. They greeted each other as though days instead of years had separated them from their last meeting.

"Howdy, Scott," the man spoke softly. "Still shootin' straight where it's most needed, I see. Town's rid of some vermin now with Moreau gone."

" 'Lo, Dan Lubec," McCord nodded. "You're lookin' fit as ever. Yep, hell won't be lonesome now with Slip tuh stoke its fires."

Old Dan chuckled. His gaze swept over Scott's unkempt figure and lifted to his eyes. "Yore daughter'n-law's got plenty of spunk, Scott," he said. "Reckon the toughest ever faced a McCord in these parts. Worse'n that you run away from years ago. Big John's got sharp eyes. He's been watchin' her fer months. Reckon John knew what he was stoppin' the sheriff fer. Jim was double trouble tuh him. He was puttin' teeth in Caprock's law an' stompin' on John's toes . . . an' he was married to a lovely lady. I reckon John ain't too old yet to appreciate a gal's looks. Cal'ate he aims tuh let only one McCord live here an' that'n wears skirts. Leavin' Caprock, Scott?"

Scott stared at Lubec. Dan was a saddle-maker. But before that, back fifteen years, he had been a hard-faced little outlaw. He and Scott met one morning on the slants of the Black Hills, with Scott freighting a law badge. Scott had been a square man then and had given Dan a chance. People had growled somewhat at this rehabilitation of a criminal. But Dan Lubec had been

a good pupil and had learned from Scott that it pays to be honest. He had made good.

But now Scott resented his meddling. He understood what was behind the sharp eyes of the other. But why couldn't people see that he, Scott McCord, was licked? He gathered up his reins. "Yes," he said flatly. "I'm leavin' town. See you in hell sometime, Dan." And he climbed tiredly into his saddle.

Lubec's frail voice followed him, a deep resignation coloring its flat tones.

"In hell, eh?" he breathed. "Yes, Scott, I reckon you will!"

ONCE out of town, Scott McCord rode hard. A man couldn't stay whipped! A hot flame was searing through him. Deadly urges were coursing again through him, the old cold flame which had ridden with him behind the silver star of Caprock town. A wrong had been done and a man must suffer. That old code beat through his brain, twisting him agonizingly. He thought of the whiskey he needed and the thought passed without the pleasure of anticipation. A man could never forget an old way of life. Even a man dead might remember what he had been. A vision of Jim's mother crossed his mind, followed again by thought of Molly McCord. Jim was dead, but a more evil threat now lay at Molly's door.

He raked spurs deeper across his shaggy pony's flanks and drove hard for his hide-out. There was a change stirring within him and he must be free of sight and sound of Big John's town before he found himself suddenly unwilling to leave. He was riding hard, stirring a thick funnel of dust up behind him when he rounded an outcropping of rock on the trail to find three men facing him.

His mount slid down to a halt and he stared. There was no mistaking the huge, flabby bulk of the biggest man. Cold, colorless eyes stared unwinkingly at him from under thin, straggling brows. The thick, folded face was devoid of expression.

"Big John Carver!" he muttered thickly.

Big John grinned widely, an unlovely grimace. His thick-lipped mouth opened and his high, treble voice poured out surprisingly.

"I want to talk to you, Scott McCord!" he said.

"Make it short, John," Scott answered, and he found his own voice solid.

"Just answer a question for me, McCord," Big John said smoothly. "Ten years ago I gave you three choices. This time I'm givin' you but two. Leave this county permanently . . . or die!"

Scott knew what his answer would be. Ten years ago he had been a strong man, one with everything in life to hold him in town . . . duty, a son, and a man's pride. But he had ridden out. Now none of those were left. But the answer which came to his lips gave the lie to his thoughts. Suddenly he felt young. A new force surged through him. He felt the slack lines lift from his face. He felt rigid power stir through all of his lank frame. His eyes felt hot with the message they flung back to Carver.

"And I'll talk to you, John Carver," he grated, "and plain! The man who gunned Jim McCord down is marked, and the man who gave the order. And up on the mesa is a girl that's to be left alone! That's a job of work and I reckon I'll stay and handle it!"

John grunted nastily. "Think cool, Scott. You're an old man. You've kegged too much red-eye to talk that big. And you forget the law. That's a bad mistake, McCord. For you killed Slip Moreau in plain sight . . . and

John Carver is once again the law in Caprock!"

"Law, hell!" Scott snapped, and his fury grew. "That's got a funny sound comin' from you. But I'm outside the law maybe further than you. A man can drift a long ways in ten years, John. I reckon I'll do my job my own way . . . and to hell with your rule book and you!"

"That's final, McCord?" John asked the question softly.

Scott nodded, his face immobile.

Big John sighed in exaggeration and jerked his head at the two with him.

"All right Stumpy," he said. "This is your deal. Wait 'till I get down the line a mile or so. Scott can forget the law, but we got to stay legal. I don't want to hear the shot nor know anything about it. Understand?"

Stumpy, red-bearded, much-feared Stumpy Brogart, grinned.

"Don't worry, John," he chuckled. "Me and Lopez know the ropes. Wouldn't surprise me if a feller ridin' this trail this afternoon or tomorrow might sort of discover old Scott McCord had kilt hisself on the way back to the mountains!"

Carver clucked his mount into motion and rode off down the trail. Scott felt sick again. He had been a fool. His executioners sat stolidly before him. His body felt cold and he wished again for the drink of whiskey at the hideout. Brogart and the Mexican with him knew their business. And because an old flame had suddenly seared him, he had chosen the wrong one of the two alternatives Big John had offered. Dan Lubec had promised Carver would rid the county of all the McCord men . . . and half of his job was done. Molly alone would be left at the big man's mercy by nightfall.

But that thought did something within himself. Molly in the clutches of John Carver, living under the same roof with that huge, soulless mass of flesh!

HIS pony was turned head toward Brogart and Lopez. Scott remembered a trick and, mercilessly setting the bit into the animal's mouth, he yanked it up into a pawing rear. And as the saddle rose under him, his hands freed the reins and clawed along his legs. His palms crossed hickory butts and his wrists snapped.

"Maria!" the Mexican gasped as he dipped for his own gun.

But Scott's shot choked the exclamation off into a wordless gurgle as Lopez dove limply from the saddle. Stumpy Brogart was a cannier fighter. With Scott's first move, he slipped out of his own kak to the far side of his horse and drummed out fire toward the mounted man from this protection. Two of the slugs tunneled into the horse between Scott's legs. Another scored the side of his head and marked the gray patch in his hair above his ear with red.

That wound seemed to steady him. A cold, thought-laced reserve fell across him. The pain of the wound was actually welcome, a stimulant he long needed. One of Brogart's feet was visible below the barrel of his mount and Scott's thumb slipped from the hammer of one of his guns. Brogart bellowed with pain as the slug smashed his foot. The blow drove him to the ground, and lying on his shoulders he fanned lead at Scott. McCord felt death slip through a fold on his jacket under his arm. His pony was dying between his knees, sinking to the ground. But in a steady instant when all movement seemed stopped for a fraction to let him line his sights, he fired again. Stumpy Brogart's howl of pain ceased and he rolled slowly over onto his face.

Scott jumped stiffly clear of his falling mount and stood spraddle-legged over the fallen gunmen. Something

warm was running down the inside of the neck of his shirt. Mechanically his hand raised and came back sticky. Blood! . . . An old man, eh? . . . Hell! . . . He suddenly remembered he was ten years younger than Big John Carver! . . . Blood . . . Well, he had answered its challenge! . . .

CHAPTER III

Carver's Law

IT was dusk when Scott McCord again rode into Caprock. This time he shied away from the single dusty street. Back of the buildings he moved carefully, dodging chance of recognition. At the rear door of Dan Lubec's shop he swung down. Dan's stretching-shed was to his right. He swung the door wide and lead Stumpy Brogart's horse into the shelter. The animal was powerful and deep-winded. Scott had tested his bottom on the ride down. He might need such a mount before he was done.

With the horse safely hidden from sight he rapped on Dan's door. The old saddle-maker showed no surprise when Scott shouldered past him. The single room of Lubec's living-quarters were dimly-lighted but Scott saw the extra bunk made up and the table set in the middle of the room.

"Just made it in time, Scott," old Dan grinned. "Supper's waiting!"

"For me?" Scott gasped.

Dan Lubec nodded. "Sure! Reckon me and Jim always figgered you right, Scott. You made a hay-wire play ten years ago. Its taken all this time for it to get through your stubborn head you might have been wrong. Three days ago, when John's boys began to push Sheriff Jim he told me that if the going got too tight for him, you'd hear of it and be down."

"He figgered wrong, Dan," Scott muttered. "I heard, but I let him die!"

"Just another mistake, old man," Dan said sympathetically. "When you rode out today I thought you were makin' another. Matter of fact, I come near to believin' you was as shot to pieces as folks have been believin' all these years. But when I saw John and his boys ride out to head you off, I knew you'd be back. Never was a time when a bushwhacker could come out on top with Scott McCord! Set and eat!"

Something warm was inside of Scott, something he hadn't known for a long time. Comradeship, trust and respect of a fellow man . . . and Dan Lubec respected few. He strode back to the door, his brass-studded belt sagging closer to lean hips.

"Thanks, Dan," he said. "Keep it warm. Got a chore, first."

"John's at his office at his house," Lubec agreed, "and he's got company you won't like!"

Dan's last words turned slowly over in Scott's mind as he moved up the street. A man stood in the twilight ahead of him on the walk. His guns hung low and were tied down. At sight of the tall, time-etched figure approaching, the fellow snapped his cigarette into the street and stood insolently barring the way, arms akimbo and hands close to black-butted guns. A Carver man, patrolling the street while his boss entertained in the rambling old house at the end of town. Scott remembered times he had met men like this before.

His stride lengthened imperceptibly and again he could feel the power of long-forgotten muscles cording his slab-like chest. The man ahead stood his gound as Scott reached him. But McCord's errand was with Big John himself. He never paused. As he came within striking-distance of the man barring his way, his arm moved

smoothly back and then forward in a piston-like drive. His knotted hand hit squarely on the point of the man's chin. The Carver henchman saw the blow start and sought to stop it with lead. But the steel-hard knuckles rang against the heavy bone of his jaw before his gun was clear of leather.

The fellow hung there for a moment teetering uncertainly. And because he was impatient to be on toward Big John's house, McCord drove again. This time the fist landed higher and on the flat of the cheek. The blow cracked like a pistol-shot and the man tore a furrow in the dust of the gutter with his head and shoulders. Iron Scott McCord was in stride again. He passed on swiftly. Another pair of men came out of a shadowy building, and seeing the set of his face, stepped quickly back to give him passage.

Ahead Scott's eyes fastened on the lighted windows of Big John Carver's house. It seemed that ten years had dropped away from him as he strode purposefully along the street. Once again he was marching down to showdown with Big John. But this time were would be but two alternatives, each ending at the same place, and it was Carver who would make the choice . . . Death for one or the other of them!

His run-down heel rang solidly on the planks of Carver's verandah and the flimsy lock of the front door snapped with a sharp crack as his weight surged against it. Before him stretched a musty hall and as his eyes squinted to the dimmer light, a door at the far end of the passageway flung open and a woman darted through it.

The girl's eyes fell across his lank shadow at the same time that he recognized her. Molly! Big John had been sure of himself, sure of Stumpy Brogart and the Mexican Lopez. Already Big John had been up on the mesa to collect his prize in the last of the McCords!

BUT there was not time for words. Heavy strides thundered up the walk to the house. Word had passed along the street that McCord was calling on Big John and the renegade's men were rallying. And behind the girl, his huge bulk throwing an ominous shadow before his coming, was John Carver himself. For a moment the two men stood facing each other, the slight form of Molly helplessly between them. Then old nerves leaped and jumped through Scott McCord. His broad-fingered hands drove sharply downward, reversed, and came up with the yawning maws of his deadly guns lined steadily toward the man in the doorway. Carver had begun an awkward draw himself, but now he stopped, a faint grin spreading over his face.

Perhaps Big John realized that Molly was a perfect screen for him. Scott moved to remedy it, edging side-ways so that he might shoot clear of the girl. But his surmise was wrong. Molly's strained white face twitched spasmodically as she suddenly saw something over Scott's shoulders. Too late he remembered men might have followed him in off the street! This was the last of his chance. As something cruelly hard crashed down on his head from behind, he steadied twitching nerves and triggered once in dead line on the side of Carver's head where it showed beyond the staring figure of the girl. Then the floor reeled and he fell heavily.

Scott slowly revived to the cold feel of night air against his aching head. Fresh blood was on his shirt and he realized that blow in Carver's house had reopened the crease of Brogart's bullet. He opened his eyes to the brilliant pin-points of night beyond the town. And where the moon made a pale disk low to the horizon, he saw

the bare arm of an old cotton-wood silhouetted against its gold circle. Hangman's Tree, made famous in pioneer days in Caprock. So this was to be a re-dedication of the old gallows! He twisted his head.

A man behind him held his slack body upright. Others were ringed about him. And facing him coldly, one cheek marked by a fresh bandage, Big John Carver sat in judgment. Beside him, her face blue with pallor, but her eyes clear and unfaltering, was Molly McCord. Scott saw the badge of courage she offered him, and he took it.

"Your play, John!" he snapped.

"Sure, Scott," the other agreed. "Always has been my play in Caprock. But this is the second time you've doubted it. This time I aim to teach you proper. And since she's got all the fight you or Jim ever had, I aim to let this gal see what scores a man buckin' John Carver can tally. Tonight I'm sitting as Judge Pro Tem of the court of Caprock. They's a few citizens dragged along to make it legal, whether they like it or not! Court's in order!"

A dry, thin grin creased Scott McCord's face. So this was to be a trial. Big John had gone far since the death of the Sheriff. Mockery of justice. And suddenly Scott was angry about it. He forgot that his own life was the prize of this game. The days of high-handed overlordship were done. Law had come and had done well, even against Big John. And mockery of the law cut McCord deeper than his own hurts.

"This man," Big John intoned solemnly, "has killed three men. One, a respected citizen and one-time deputy Sheriff, was killed openly on the streets of the town. The other two were murdered in ambush back in the hills. With due consideration, this court passes sentence. Scott McCord, outlaw and murderer, shall be hung by his neck until dead. And thereafter for one week his body shall hang as warning to all those who would forget the law of Caprock. Court is. . . . !"

Big John's peculiar treble voice was cut short by a rasping snarl from a cut-bank above the court-scene.

"Get 'em high and quick!" came the snarl. Scott's pulses leaped. Surrounded by foes they had not disarmed him or bound his hands. Big John had been very sure. But there was an ally for a broken-down lawman heading back up the twists of his own trail.

A man behind Scott grunted and snapped a weapon upward toward the voice on the bank. A plume of flame lighted the clay crest and lead slammed solidly into the hasty gunman. On the heels of the echo of the shot, the harsh voice came again.

"Get down to the horses, Scott!"

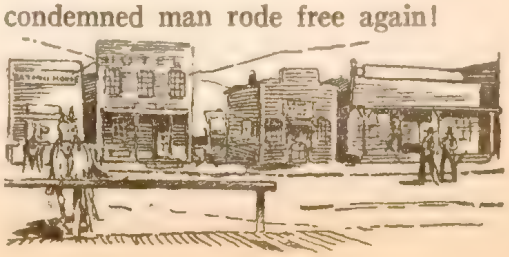
And when McCord stopped to tug at the girl's arm, the voice rose again:

"Later, later! She'll be all right for a spell. Fog it!"

Molly pulled her arm free and nodded for him to go. Scott paused for a moment. The man on the bank was right, he guessed. And Carver's crew were getting nervous. More than one might break next time and his ally would be done for. He dug his boots into the turf and ran awkwardly down to the horses. As he hit the saddle he heard Big John's thin voice bellow identification of the man on the bank . . . correctly.

"That sounded almighty like Dan Lubec!" the renegade howled.

Scott grinned. He knew it was Dan . . . and Big John's law had proved as full of holes as the law of the state. A condemned man rode free again!



CHAPTER IV

Renegade's Choice

DAN LUBEC was but a dozen yards behind Scott when he hit the town. The street was crowded with townspeople, each uncertain as to what had happened under Hangman's Tree and each praying for one answer. Scott saw that in him they had the answer they sought. Carver's rule had galled these people about to the limit. Peaceable and with too much at stake they would never come to open grips with Big John, but from here on out they'd fight him quietly. He saw women on the street and was proud to see they met his gaze squarely as though an old confidence had returned to them.

Lubec flung down from his mount in the middle of the street and with a stentorian voice assembled the crowd about him.

"We're cramped for time, folks!" he said, "but we've got somethin' to do. John Carver has got the reins, but we're the votin' public. Turn yourselves back ten years right quick. I'm nominatin' Scott McCord as Sheriff of Caprock!"

A murmur of surprise went up from the group. Men turned to each other with muttered words. Women looked up to the ragged man in the saddle above them in quiet estimation. Finally the wave broke. A husky voice rose above the mutter.

"He done it once. I recollect it well. He fit Big John 'til it was riskin' little Jimmy's life before he run. They ain't nothin' to stop him now. What he did once he can do again. I'm votin' for McCord!"

The tumult that rose after that left little doubt as to the answer. Scott waited until he was sure the town meant its words, then he twisted in the saddle.

"They's apt to be mistakes when something serious is done in haste . . . but not this time. Carver's on his way down and I've got to deal with him my own way. Clear the streets and keep them clear. Everything's got to be normal!"

There was a proud lift to his voice now. Death was in the air, but with that vote of confidence and pride in his ears, this was a night to die . . . a man!

The street cleared rapidly and assumed its usual quiet drowsiness under his orders. Scott swung down and followed Dan Lubec into the old man's saddle-shop.

"Thanks, Dan!" he said simply. "Reckon I played the smartest game I ever sat in the day I give you a chance to settle down in Caprock. You sure repaid tonight!"

"Let it go," Lubec said rapidly. "Swear me in, quick!"

"What for, Dan?" Scott gasped. "You aimin' to claw them Carver boys to pieces with your bare hands?"

"There ain't many left, Scott," Lubec answered slyly. "Jest the ones John has got with him out at the cottonwood. I acted extra-legal-like, I reckon. See that old double-bore over there? Well, whiles they were cartin' you out to the tree I charged her up and cracked down on ever' Carver fellow I could find on the street. Be surprised how peaceable they quit with that old cannon nosin' in their direction. I've got nine of 'em locked up in the jail waitin' orders. Thought I ought to be deputized after that!"

"You're sworn in, right now!" Scott chuckled appreciatively. "And as chief deputy, you skin up to the other end of town and try to snake Molly out of that crew when they come in. They won't be lookin' for us here and we'll have the edge. What happens will happen

fast, but I aim to do the job I should have done ten years ago . . . wind up Big John Carver proper!"

Dan Lubec nodded. Seizing the huge old double-bore in the corner, he slipped out the back door. He had been gone perhaps three minutes when Scott caught the muted thunder of hoof-beats bearing down on the town from the direction of the cottonwoods.

He shook down his guns methodically and tipped his hat back from his face. The moon was higher now, with good shooting-light. Moving again almost as methodically as he had when he hit town to see his son die, Scott McCord, again Sheriff of Caprock, moved out to face his duty.

Carver's cavalcade hit the lower end of town in a close-packed bunch. Scott thought they had taken over-long in reaching town until he saw a riderless horse in the midst of the group. Across the saddle dangled the body of the man Dan Lubec had nailed from the cut-bank. And with the dead man were four other Carver riders. Big John and Molly rode slightly in the lead.

McCord crouched on the porch of Lubec's store and watched the approach of the riders. Seconds ticked slowly by and as they moved on up the street in rhythmic hoof-thunder, Molly still stayed beside the leader. A frown set deep in Scott's brow. If Dan was unable to free her from that pack, his own hands would be tied.

Then Dan Lubec made his bid. From the corner of a building a thin hemp shadow curled out and settled unerringly over the straining neck of Molly's mount. The animal was flung about and went to its knees as the slack tightened from the rope. The girl left the saddle gracefully. And showing how deeply her rangeland lessons were learned, landed lightly on her feet in the shadow of the next building. She fell stretched out against the wall, but Scott saw the fall was purposeful.

EVERY ally on his side of the fence was playing the hand to perfection.

Big John Carver pulled hard at his own reins as Molly's horse went down, but in that instant Scott McCord left the shadow of Lubec's shop. His voice rang clearly through the town, pealing like a trumpet of doom down the parade of false-fronted buildings.

"Carver!"

Big John's bloated body seemed to go rigid with the impact of that challenge. His squinting eyes sought and found the taut figure of the other facing riders in the middle of the street. Carver's hand went toward his gun and came up lashing fire. Lead bit a screaming tunnel in the air above Scott's head.

"You had your choice, John!" he grated. "Here's my reply!"

Then his own hands were filled with bucking, leaping guns. One of the riders facing him slid backward over the rump of his mount, leather from his saddle-pommel driven clear through him. Another let drive with a Winchester. The slug smashed across the heavy cord cresting Scott's collar-bone and drove him into the dust. But he came up with guns still flaming and another saddle emptied. The man with the Winchester leveled again. But the night in front of one of the buildings erupted in terrific concussion as Dan Lubec triggered his old double-bore. The man with the rifle was driven clear of his saddle and across the rump of the remaining gunman's horse by the force of that charge. The last henchman of the renegade threw up his hands high and rode toward Lubec's hiding-place. But Big John Carver was no quitter.

He slid from his saddle to the solidness of the street and began a slow pace toward Scott. The huge man's guns spoke slowly and steadily. Lead

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whipped and cracked about McCord as he made his own reply. Another slug drove into him, driving him to his knees. As he struggled to his feet a nausea swept through him and he knew he had been badly hit. But still his guns spoke their grim message. He saw a patch of cloth fly from Big John's shoulder and the renegade's left hand gun dropped from nerveless fingers. Still he came on.

The street reverberated with the clash of these two. Men shuddered and women watched with unseeing eyes. Two primal forces of the rangeland were clashing. Law and rule of the ruthless were pitched for the final round. Sound tore from flaming muzzles in a continuous roar. This was the ultimate of conflict . . . the meeting of the immovable object and the irresistible force . . . And Scott McCord knew he had won.

Three straight shots jerked John Carver's body with their force. It mattered little now that another leaden arrow had plowed through his own arm. The renegade was doomed. But Big John was still on his feet when Scott McCord pitched face-forward into the dust, crushed under a pall of blackness.

After hours which had been only seconds he stirred and found friends about him. Gunsmoke still tinged the air sulphurously, but a quiet was on the street. Dan Lubec bent over him and fumbled with his jacket. There was warmth in the old man's eyes and a great pride as he stepped back. Scott looked down. Over his wounded shoul-

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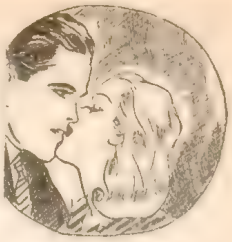

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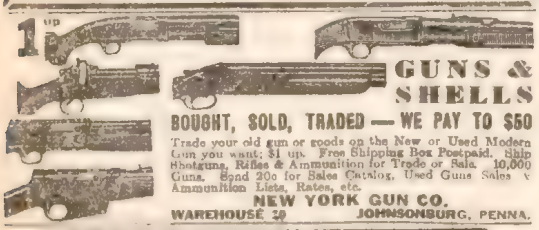

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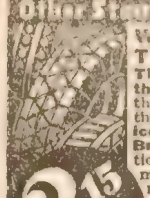

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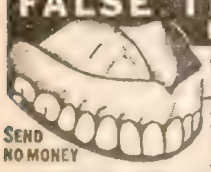

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der, shining dully in the dim light of night was a silver star.

"Doc Putter took it off of Jim," Dan said simply. "Reckon he would have admired to clip it on you hisself!"

Scott twisted half about and found Molly McCord's arms about him. He smiled quizzically and the girl answered with eyes now dimmed with tears.

"Dad!" she said brokenly. "I was so afraid you wouldn't make it back, wouldn't realize that I needed you. Jim would be proud of you, now. He'd be glad to turn his job over to you . . . at home and in town!"

"Takin' care of you, Molly?" Scott asked softly. "Never had a daughter, but I reckon I can make it."

"More than that, Dad," Molly answered with a gentle smile. "We've got a bigger job. I'm expecting James Scott McCord in the spring and he's got to be raised right!"

Scott's hand reached out to close over Molly's. The crowd began to drift away, to leave its lawmen returned to greater pleasures than any they could offer. And through a rift in the press, Scott caught sight of Dan Lubec standing over the body of Big John Carver where it lay a shapeless, dusty heap in the street. Dan was talking generally to the crowd about him.

"Funny thing about John. He was a smart man . . . but not smart enough. A feller'd think he'd know you can whip lawmen, maybe even run 'em out of town, but when lawmen die . . . there's hell to pay!"

THE END

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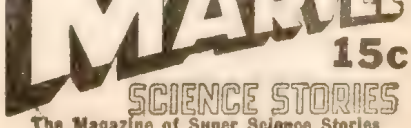

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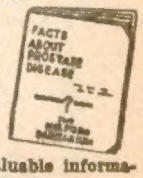

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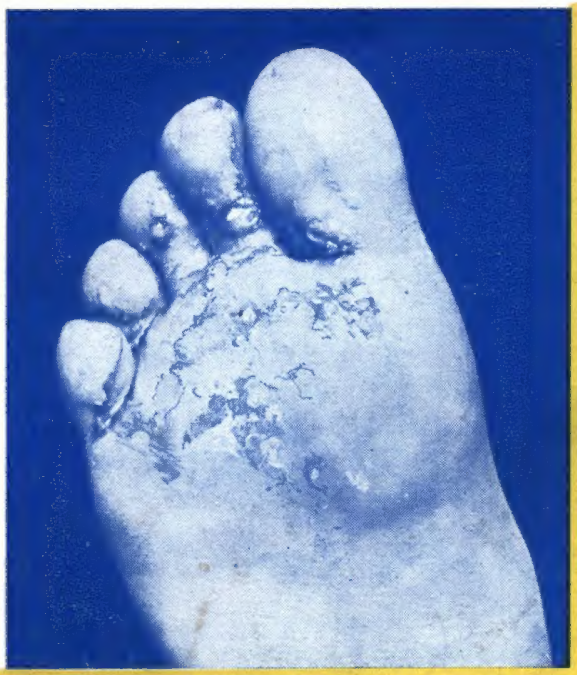

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Get rid of this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

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